vol. 1
Author
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Turning the Tables on the
Seatmate
Killer

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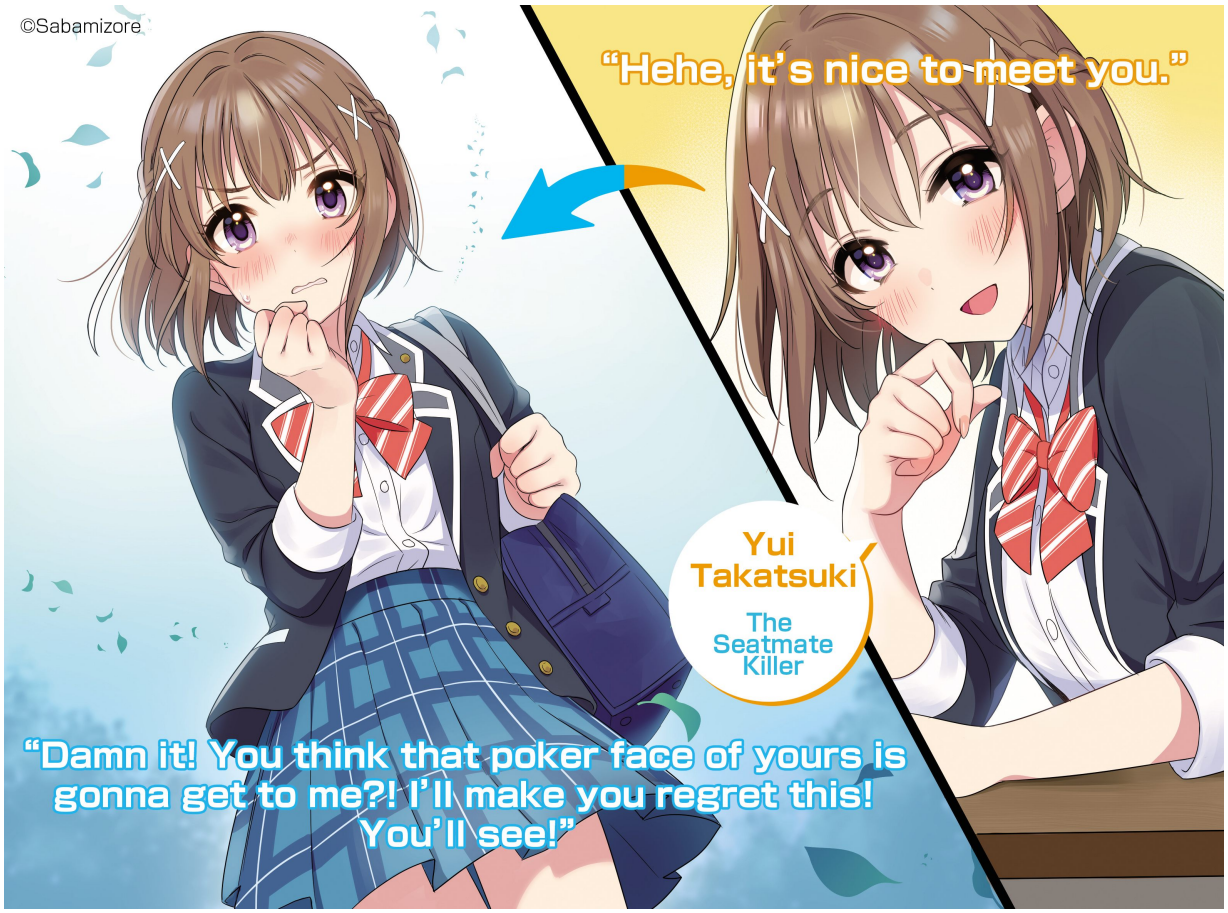
©Sabamizore
"Hehe, it's nice to meet you."
Yui Takatsuki
The Seatmate Killer
"Damn it! You think that poker face of yours is gonna get to me?! I'll make you regret this! You'll see!"

©Sabamizore
"Waaah! Help me, sis! What should I do?"
Maki Takatsuki
Yui's older sister
"Whoa, Yui's activated her cyute mode? It's been a while."

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"Welcome home, Master Yukkie!"
Mina Narito
Yuki's little sister

Contents

Chapter One: The Best Seat
Chapter Two: Big Brother's Day
Chapter Three: Seatmate Phobia
Chapter Four: Lunch Box
Chapter Five: Returning the Favor
Chapter Six: Seatmate Killer Victims Alliance
Chapter Seven: Completely Serious
Chapter Eight: A Present
Chapter Nine: Cyute Mode
Chapter Ten: Mischievous Little Devil Yui
Chapter Eleven: A Day Out With Mina
Chapter Twelve: Star Actress Yui
Chapter Thirteen: A Date
Chapter Fourteen: Slayer of the Seatmate Killer
Extra Side Story: The Sleeping Beauty
Afterword

Chapter One

The Best Seat

"Whoa, aren't you the lucky one! Getting the best seat at the back near the window and everything!"

It was the early morning of a school day, and Yuuki Narito was being held up by one of the select few people he spoke on a regular basis with in class, Keitarou Hayami, while he was changing his shoes at the entrance. Keitarou stood out a bit with his spiky hair, rolled-up sleeves, and rebelliously unbuttoned shirt collar. He was cooling himself off with a fan, despite it being particularly temperate outside that day.

"Yeah, the window seat *is* pretty nice," responded Yuuki, very much uninterested.

"Don't play dumb, we both know the window's just the icing on the cake!"

It had already been two months since Yuuki had started his second year at Higashiseiyou High School. Just when the students were finally getting settled in, a raffle was held to switch up the assigned seating arrangement. Yuuki had seemingly gotten lucky with his new seat, which was why Keitarou was now hassling him about it. It turned out that Yuuki now had the privilege of sitting next to Yui Takatsuki, the most beautiful girl in the entire school.

"I'm not the only one who noticed, man. Everybody's talking about it right now. What're the odds, y'know? You've easily used up the rest of your luck for years to come, man."

"I'd rather have used that luck to win the lottery, to be honest."

"Why do you always gotta be like that? Would it kill you to, you know, not be a debbie-downer? Ever heard of this brand new invention called *caring* a bit?"

As far as Yuuki saw it, he didn't want his potential fortune to be wasted so frivolously without his knowledge, and especially not on something so trivial. While Keitarou was always calling him indifferent, Yuuki in turn thought of Keitarou as much too energetic. In fact, Yuuki once told him that he looked like the kind of person who would go out of his way to use a tedious rip-off calendar, and Keitarou failed to see anything wrong with that.

“You may pretend that none of this matters to you, but I’m certain that gloomy dork brain of yours has been racing since last night. ‘Oh my, whatever would I do if she spoke to me? What should I say?!’”

According to Keitarou, Yuuki was way more passive than the average person. Also, he always looked like he hadn’t gotten enough sleep the night before. Like his head was empty or something. But other than that, Yuuki was your run-of-the-mill average high school student. Or at least that’s what he thought of himself.

“I don’t think she has a reason to talk to someone like me.”

“Nah bro, you got it all wrong. She’s got a habit of sparking up conversations with any guy who sits next to her, regardless of if they’re as bland as you or not.”

“Wait, she talks to whoever sits beside her?”

“Rumor has it that all the guys that sat next to her ended up confessing their love to her and got utterly rejected. Actually, I feel like I’ve definitely mentioned this before.”

“I mean, she’s called ‘The Seatmate Killer’ for a reason, my guy. Speaking of, we’ve got a betting pool going on how many days it’ll take for you to fall victim to her. Consensus is three days tops, but you’re my dude so I trust you to survive a whole week.”

Keitarou continued spouting nonsense and violently patting Yuuki on the shoulder until they arrived at their classroom. As soon as they walked in, Keitarou started messing around all over the classroom as he usually did. And, as per usual, he was met with cold gazes from everyone around as they did their best to ignore him. Yuuki, on the other hand, made his way straight to his desk without greeting anyone at all.

One may ask how these two wildly different individuals became friends. The answer would be quite simple: it was by pure coincidence.

A long, long time ago, during a certain PE class in the first year of high school, everyone was asked to split into pairs for an exercise. Keitarou was shunned as he typically had been, and everyone simply forgot about Yuuki altogether, so the two had no choice but to partner up. Once the second year rolled around, the pair ended up in the same class. One thing led to another, and now they spent a fair amount of time together.

Yuuki was always of the belief that everything in life was a product of coincidence. Yui Takatsuki ending up as his seatmate was obviously no

exception. *I hope she isn't too annoying,* Yuuki thought as he made his way toward his seat by the window, letting out a sleepy yawn along the way.

"Mornin,'" said Yui with a smile while Yuuki got settled into his new seat.

"Good morning," he coldly responded.

"Hehe, what's with all the formality?"

"We barely know each other."

"Oh come on, no need to be so cold. We're classmates!"

"True, but we've also never spoken to each other before."

"Well, now that we have, I guess you can be more casual!" she giggled and scooted closer to Yuuki.

About two months had elapsed since Yuuki had ended up in this class, but he certainly didn't recall ever even interacting with Yui before. Not even a simple greeting came to mind. Their seats were far apart from each other, so they never had any opportunity to chat to begin with. In other words, Yuuki's astonishment at her sudden friendliness was perfectly excusable.

Of course, he still saw her as just another classmate. Though now he was convinced that her nickname—The Seatmate Killer—wasn't just for show.

Speaking of which, Yuuki had the tendency to not speak with girls who sat next to him. As long as they didn't reach out to him, he never really had a reason to approach them either. He simply didn't care much about his peers, which in turn led to him being somewhat isolated from the rest of the class.

Now that the greetings were hopefully over, Yuuki pulled out a book from his desk and began reading.

"Hey, what'cha you reading there?" Yui suddenly asked. She had noticed that Yuuki was completely ignoring her glances and elected to switch tactics.

"A book."

"Oohhh, look who's stingy today. It's like you have a Berlin wall built up around you."

"They took that down ages ago, though?"

"Huh, okay, nevermind then... But wouldn't that mean that you're defenseless now?"

"I still have two colossal ones left."

“There better not be any titans in those walls, if you catch my drift!” she chuckled a bit before once more attempting to lock eyes with Yuuki. “Hmm, I didn’t take you for the referencing kind, Narito.”

“Hold on, before you say anything else,” Yuuki interjected as he extended his finger and drew a line on the side of the desk, “I believe that this much of the desk is my safe zone.”

“Zone? Ah, I see. The Narito Zone... What would happen if I accidentally entered it? Will I get drawn in and eat the people inside?”

“I’ll just be very... surprised, let’s say.”

“Uh-huh. Anyways, what kind of book is it? Are there any dirty things in there?” she asked. The question was so completely out of left field that it caught Yuuki completely off guard, but he managed to maintain his cool-headed appearance by focusing on his book harder. Yui took advantage and brought herself closer still to the boy so that she could get a better look at what he was reading.

“Oowah,” shrieked Yuuki. This was the second time she’d managed to shock him in just a matter of moments.

“What even was that noise you made?” she said with a quizzical look. She was now so close to Yuuki that he could practically see the tiniest strands of her sweetly-scented shoulder-length brunette hair fluttering around. It was nothing short of dazzling.

He noticed that Yui had her eyes cast down, as though she was reading the book alongside him. He wondered what she was really up to, but resolved to simply shut a book and put an end to this annoyance. Her reading material now gone, Yui returned to her seat.

“*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, huh? Looks like a tough read... Are you a big fan of philosophy books, by any chance?”

“Nah, I don’t usually read them.”

“So then why are you acting like I caught you reading something naughty?”

Well, I mean, the book is extremely obscene in its own unique way, he thought to himself before saying, “I’m not. I just wanted to see for myself if it’s as good as they say it is.”

“Do you just have it out for someone who likes the book and desperately want to prove them wrong or something? Never mind that, how did you find it? And has it lived up to your expectations?”

“Not even. It’s so convoluted that it angers me,” Yuuki answered. He firmly believed that pretending to know about a topic while not actually having a good grasp on it led to the slippery slope that would kickstart all of the conceited nuisances out there. So ultimately, Yuuki wanted to give his honest opinion regardless of what people might think.

“... Then why exactly are you still reading it?”

She isn’t wrong. I feel like the rest of this book is shaping up to be a drag, he thought. He promptly stuffed the book back inside his desk. Yui, apparently feeling guilty over having ruined his fun, began fishing in her own bag for something to make it up to him. After a brief moment, she produced a book of her own.

“Hey, you know what? I have this book I just finished reading. How about I lend it to you? Here you go. It’s called *I Want To Eat Your Liver*.”

“Is that some kind of grotesque murder-mystery? Or a story that portrays characters under the influence?”

“Those are the first things that come to mind, right? But actually it’s a very moving love story.”

“I’ll pass. Not a big fan of the genre”

“Whaaa—?! Why’s that? Come on, give it a shot! I guarantee that it’s interesting, so read it!”

“I usually don’t accept anything from other people.”

“Is that some sort of ninja code? Scared that it might explode in your hands?”

The words “love story” were more than enough to trigger immediate disapproval from deep within Yuuki. It would be anyone’s guess whether it was simply down to his unwillingness to read romance, or if it was due to his general skepticism about its quality. What was undeniable, however, was the fact that it was a completely foreign concept for him. After all, he’s not exactly someone who’s had a ton of female friends, let alone a girlfriend. It didn’t stop Yui from trying to force the book onto him though, but Yuuki folded his arms defiantly in response. He clearly had no intention of budging any time soon.

“I won’t let you marry my daughter! Go back the way you came!”

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t dub dialogue over me.”

“Hehe, it sounds like something you’d say with that expression. You’re a pretty weird guy.”

“I’m completely normal,” Yuuki declared. *There isn’t anyone out there as average and as ordinary as me.*

“I’m so glad I got seated next to someone as intriguing as you.”

“I’m telling you, I’m really not,” he stressed one more time. *There isn’t anyone out there as mediocre and as plain as me.*

“Hehe, well once again, nice to meet you,” she said with a slight tilt of the head and a friendly smile.

This was the first time Yuuki had gotten an up-close look at her face. Her perfectly-arched eyebrows were hidden behind her cute bangs. Her doe eyes made her look cute and innocent, and served to enhance her generally charming appearance. Her dainty nose was on the smaller, yet more adorable side, and her broad smile served to accentuate the glossy tone of her lips.

I see, so this is why they call her—

“The Seatmate Killer,” the most beautiful girl in class—no, the whole school. She was undoubtedly good looking. The only problem was whether you’re attracted to subtle beauties like her, or if you prefer the more striking ones. Whatever the case, that same delicate beauty was flashing Yuuki a cheerful smile.

“Hm? What’s wrong?” Yui asked with a dubious look when she noticed his stare.

“No, it’s nothing,“ he answered, averting his eyes as he focused his attention down at her lips. *She has such perfect teeth. I’m jealous.*

Yuuki spent the rest of the time before class started dwelling on nothing of particular importance. Eventually, the bell rang, and their teacher walked into the classroom shortly after. Yui watched him turn his attention to the teacher and quietly snickered to herself, probably wondering just what was wrong with him.

As always, nothing noteworthy happened during the morning homeroom, and the students returned to their lively selves shortly after it ended. Yui was no exception, as she wasted no time speaking with Yuuki again while preparing her textbooks and such for the upcoming class.

“Hey, Narito... Umm... about our English class, first period... I’m sure the teacher will call on me, and well... I’m feeling nervous and was wondering if you’d let me compare my homework to yours! Pretty please?” she clasped her hands together and bowed her head in an exaggerated manner. “Can I? I guess it’s alright if you don’t want to...”

“I wouldn’t mind showing you, if I actually finished it. It looked way too complicated.”

“Whaa—? You haven’t done it? Then why are you reading a book like you haven’t got a care in the world?”

“It isn’t like I’ll finish it on time anyway,” he said, completely monotone. He figured that was the end of the conversation, but Yui clearly wasn’t planning on letting him off the hook that easily. Instead, she decided to give him a piece of her mind.

“You do understand that you’re next in line to get picked after me, right? Don’t you know Miura’s the kind of scary teacher you don’t want to get on the wrong side of?”

“It’s okay. I’m prepared for the consequences.”

“Prepared? That’s all well and good, but don’t you even feel the tiniest bit guilty about it?!” she complained. She flipped through the pages of her notebook with a frown. “Here then. You can copy mine.”

“I appreciate the thought, but copying it kinda defeats the purpose.”

“That doesn’t sound all that convincing coming from someone who doesn’t even bother to do his homework. I’d feel nervous if someone so careless was sitting beside me, stumbling on every word. So come on now, chop chop!”

“Secondhand embarrassment, huh... or maybe...”

“Never mind that now. Just get to copying my answers, okay?” she insisted, practically forcing her notebook onto him. Having the answers literally dropped into his lap felt a bit anticlimactic for Yuuki, what with him having already mentally prepared himself for the devastation that was to come, but it looked like Yui wouldn’t let him hear the end of it if he didn’t comply. So, after a good amount of contemplation, he made the prudent choice to do as he was told.

“Ah...”

“What is it? Something got you stumped?”

“Your handwriting is beautiful is all.”

“Wh-Whaa—? Y-You really think so? I think it’s normal, personally...”

“Actually yeah, it’s not that pretty. Way too stereotypical.”

“Just get on with it,” Yui whined as she rushed him. The bell rang just when Yuuki had finished copying the answers, and the teacher entered the room soon after.

Miura the English teacher was in his late forties and came across as deceivingly harmless, but this was nothing more than a facade. Beneath his slim pair of glasses hid the cold, emotionless eyes of a ruthless pedagogue. He had built himself a reputation of brutal strictness which extended not only to his teaching methods in class, but to the assignments he handed out, as well. In other words, Yui's worries were more than justified.

If Miura ever learned that a student had been slacking off on their homework, well, saying that he'd give them a hard time would be quite the understatement. The fact that the class had to face this monster of a teacher during the first period didn't help matters either, as the tension was palpable much before the bell had even rung.

Miura wrapped up his morning greetings and hurriedly cracked open his textbook before addressing the class once again.

"Let's see here... It's the 3rd of June today, so how about we begin the day with the person in the 18th seat. You're up, Takatsuki."

"Y-Yes!"

"Actually, I changed my mind. Let's go with the seat right beside you. Bet you didn't see that one coming, Narito," he quipped with a broad smile. It seemed that, at least for the time being, Miura was in good enough spirits to joke around with the class. This helped to loosen up the mood of the students, though they were all keenly aware that this jovial mood could turn on a dime if Yuuki were to answer incorrectly.

Everyone's attention was focused on him whether he liked it or not, but he paid them no mind. He simply read the answers to Miura's questions from the parts that he had so shamelessly copied from Yui's homework.

"Excellent! Wonderful! Great to see you put the effort in!" exclaimed Miura.

Out of the corner of his eye, Yuuki noticed Yui smiling from ear to ear and shooting adorable peace signs at him. He understood why she was so ecstatic; Miura's words of praise were actually meant for her, after all.

"Okay, Takatsuki, it's your turn now."

"Wha—?! So I'm also getting picked?!"

"I never said I'd let you off scot-free. And what are you doing with your hands, by the way?"

"I-It's nothing!" Yui semi-shouted, flustered. Suddenly, the entire classroom fell into utter turmoil as Yui made a mess of her words as she

tried to answer Miura's questions. This rare occurrence was punctuated by her completely beet-red face.

"Hmm, you made a couple mistakes here and there, but good job overall," said Miura.

Yui heaved a sigh of relief, but quickly puckered her lips into a pout as she glared in Yuuki's direction. Yuuki himself was at a loss on what to do, so he decided to shoot a peace sign her way, as well. That might not have been the wisest move, though, as an ominous smile quickly formed on her face right after.

The first period peaked early and otherwise proceeded uneventfully. Once the bell rang, the classroom burst into life once more. Yui, however, was still staring silently at Yuuki. At first, he figured that she might be looking to complain to him about something, but then her serious expression appeared to soften a bit.

"Hehe, guess we both got picked in the end," she said. "I'm glad I decided to share my homework with you."

"Thank you, I appreciate the help."

"But you better do it yourself next time around, you hear?"

"I will," he responded. He intended to sound candid, but Yui must have found something funny, because she suddenly burst into an uncontrollable fit of giggles.

"Sorry, my bad," she finally wheezed. "You sounded way too sincere there. Hehe, you're an interesting guy, Narito~"

She really does smile a lot, Yuuki thought to himself. He gazed upon her visage for a while when he was suddenly struck by words of wisdom Keitarou had imparted upon him in the past.

"*The Seatmate Killer's smile is a force to be reckoned with! It's otherworldly cute. I always feel like my heart is going to burst out of my chest whenever I see it! Aaah!"*

"Hey, Takatsuki," Yuuki called out to her. It seemed her innocent smile made him want to continue the conversation.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Ummm, this is sort of hard to say, but..."

"What's wrong? It's okay, you can tell me anything!" she chirped. Yui's gentle voice and reassuring smile helped Yuuki to overcome his hesitation and just ask her directly.

"Have you done... your math homework, too?"

"... You gotta be kidding me," she frowned, her once joyful expression vanishing in an instant.

I knew it was all a facade, Yuuki thought to himself.

◆◇

When lunch break came around, Yuuki found himself munching on his rice balls alone. Keitarou bounded into his personal space out of nowhere though, and he was drooling to know all of the juicy details about Yuuki's new seat and his new seatmate. The seatmate in question was currently eating and socializing with another group of girls at a different table.

"How about you sit down?" Yuuki asked, pointing at Yui's currently vacant seat.

Keitarou simply shook his head from where he was stationed, leaning against the wall.

"Helloooo?" he said. "You forget whose seat we're talking about? I don't want any death threats coming my way!"

"Death threats? From whom?"

"The gaggle of losers sitting over there, obviously. They may look all pure and innocent on the outside, but they're the type of weirdos who spend all day fantasizing about burying their faces wherever Yui's sat down."

"No kidding?" Yuuki said. *I don't know what you'd get out of rubbing your face against a piece of wood...*

Suddenly, Keitarou got down on his knees in front of Yui's desk. Before Yuuki could ask just what in the world he was doing, he began praying to the seat for good luck.

"—Well anyways, how is it?" As soon as it had begun, it was over, and Keitarou was now leaning in and whispering in Yuuki's ears. "What do you think of her?"

"I think she's pretty nice," Yuuki answered flatly.

"What's that now?" Keitarou replied with a huge grin on his face, "You're telling me she's already got your seal of approval just half a day in? Impossible! I mean, everyone was saying that you're pretty much one smile away from fallin' for her, but damn, dude."

"She let me copy her homework."

"... Not the answer I was expecting. Well, nevermind... Wait, hold up. *You* copied off of *her*? C'mon man, get your head in the game! *You're* the

one who's supposed to be doing all the impressing, not her!"

Keitarou progressed further into Yuuki's personal space as he kept pestering him for more information. It was to no avail, however, as Yuuki kept quiet and looked to be focused entirely on finishing his food. Suddenly, Keitarou wrapped his arm around Yuuki's shoulders and brought him in for some manly guidance.

"A piece of advice from one friend to the other," he said. "You might think that things are going well with her, but I gotta snap you back to reality... She's that chatty with everyone. Better not get your hopes up!"

"Wasn't planning on it."

"It's all 'cuz you're seated next to her, man. It's all in your head; don't get it twisted," warned Keitarou, making it seem like some form of a suspension bridge effect was at play or something.

Yuuki was barely listening to Keitarou when they both noticed Yui briefly return to her seat. She retrieved something from her desk, gave them both a brief glance, and returned to the group of girls she'd been chatting with.

"What's wrong, Keitarou? You look pale."

Though Keitarou's rowdy character would seem to dictate that he at least make an attempt to get Yui's attention, he in fact did no such thing. It was almost like he was avoiding her altogether.

"Ahaha, nah, it's nothing, really. We just used to go to the same middle school and... y'know. Stuff."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Yuuki said, eyebrow quirked. "Well whatever, I guess."

"Wow, dude. Can you at least pretend to be interested in my mysterious, sordid past? What kinda detective lets the witnesses go home without even taking their statements?" Keitarou protested.

Yuuki once again elected to ignore Keitarou and his ramblings when Yui walked back over to her desk for a second time. Keitarou suddenly shifted his gaze toward the window in a feeble attempt to not appear suspicious, and Yuuki followed suit. Unfortunately for him, he felt someone tapping on his shoulder. He turned to see Yui stooping over him.

"Hey, Narito. Do you remember what we talked about just a while back?" she asked calmly.

"Huh? Oh yeah, of course... I do."

"Very convincing there, chief."

Apparently, Yuuki was supposed to treat Yui to some drinks as a way to thank her for generously letting him copy her homework. He'd already completely forgotten about it though, on account of the fact that they had two classes back-to-back right after.

"I'll go get you something right now. Want something in particular?"

"Hmmmm, I wonder what drinks they have... How about I tag along?"

"Huh? Sure, I suppose."

Yuuki was clearly taken by surprise, but he had no reason to decline either. This would normally have been a perfect opportunity for Keitarou to pick on Yuuki, but before anyone had realized it, he had already retreated from the scene entirely. Yuuki was relieved that nobody was around to bother him as he stood up from his seat and left the classroom with Yui in tow.

They made their way toward the first floor where the school shop and all the vending machines were located. This part of the school could get very crowded depending on the time of day, but there were few people around now since the pair had shown up at a more or less unusual time.

As they waited in line for the vending machine, Yui suddenly turned to Yuuki and broke the silence. "You're awfully quiet, Narito. Cat got your tongue or something?"

"This is just how I am."

"There's nothing normal about being straight-up silent for five minutes!"

"You aren't any better yourself," Yuuki retorted. He wasn't wrong. After all, they'd both walked down the hallway without so much as a word exchanged between them.

"I was waiting for you to say something, anything! And then we got here before I knew it."

"I was waiting on you, too."

"... You for real?"

As usual, Yuuki was honest. He truly thought that Yui would take the initiative to start a conversation just as she'd been doing all morning. Yui, meanwhile, likely suspected that perhaps Yuuki was merely playing some incomprehensible mind games. Yet the truth was that the boy simply couldn't come up with a topic to save his life.

"Nah, wait, don't tell me... Were you perhaps nervous?" she asked teasingly, staring adorably up at Yuuki.

“Me? Nervous?”

“You know what? Forget it. I didn’t say anything,” she said with a shake of her head.

Their little back-and-forth was interrupted by what seemed to be a couple flirting a little too intensely in front of them in line.

“Heyyy, Taku-pie, what would you like to drink?”

“I’m not sure, sweet pea~ What would *you* like to have?”

“I’m really not suuuure... Your sweet pea can’t decide on her own~ Can you choose for me, cutiepie?”

“How about we both press what we usually drink? Just to see what happens!”

“What a sweet idea! I’m sure we’ll end up picking the same thing!”

It was unclear whether the couple were flaunting their relationship or simply unaware that they were holding up the entire line. After taking their sweet time to settle on a drink, they finally walked away, their arms entangled and their eyes firmly locked onto each other.

“Tch,” Yui stared blankly at the couple as they left.

“Did you click your tongue just now?”

“Who me? I would never! What did you make of that lovey-dovey bunch back there, anyways?”

“Nothing much outside of them being incredibly annoying.”

“I see... I think this is the first time we’ve seen eye to eye.”

“So you *did* click your tongue at them.”

“I just told you I didn’t! Hatred weighs the heart down, you know,” she teasingly tapped her finger against Yuuki’s nose before turning back to the vending machine. “Got any suggestions?”

“Hmmm. How about some Dr. Fepper?”

“Pass. Any other ones?”

Yuuki’s ideas seemingly started and ended with Dr. Fepper, so Yui ended up going with some black tea. Yuuki bought himself a drink too while they were at it, then cracked open the plastic bottle with a satisfying hiss.

“Do you actually like that stuff?” she asked, skepticism engulfing her face.

“Yep. Want a sip?” he answered and offered her the bottle.

“Uhh, well, I mean...” her voice trailed off. Her eyes darted back and forth as she awkwardly pointed at the mouth of the bottle.

“Oh, I get you. I drank from this side, so you can drink from the other if you want.”

“You’re actually okay with us drinking from the same bottle?!”

“Yeah, I don’t particularly mind.”

“Th-That so? I’ll have you know that it’s not a big deal for me either! Not at all!”

“Well, then go right ahead,” he said as he passed her the drink.

Yui drew a complete blank; she could do nothing but stare silently at the bottle in her hand. It took what felt like an eternity for her to snap out of it, and judging by the look on her face, she clearly had some grievances to hurl Yuuki’s way.

“What?” he asked.

“Umm, well, I can’t drink in peace with you ogling me so hard! Turn around, now!” she demanded. She clearly wasn’t taking no for an answer, as she grabbed him and forced him to look away

It’s not like I’m watching you change or something, Yuuki silently protested. He didn’t have much time to stew, though, as before long, she let him know that it was okay to turn around. She handed the bottle right back at him as soon as he did.

“Hm? So you tried it?”

“Sure did.”

“Really? Looks untouched to me.”

“I said I did!” she exclaimed, her face turning red with anger.

I guess she didn’t like how it tasted after all, Yuuki concluded.

◆◇

As soon as classes were done for the day, Yuuki hurried off toward the library. He retrieved the philosophical book he’d been reading earlier from his bag and dropped it into the return box. He turned to leave, but unfortunately ended up making eye contact with one of the teachers that happened to be milling around.

“Oh, how did you find it?” she asked.

“A difficult read, for sure.”

“Haha, I see,” she responded, cracking an amused smile.

Yuuki couldn’t bring himself to tell her how confusing and boring the experience had been for him. The teacher looked to have taken a liking to

him for some reason, to the point that she had taken up a lot of his time the last time he had come to the library. Thus Yuuki decided to beat a hasty retreat to the school entrance before the teacher had the chance to recommend him yet another bizarre tome.

"I spy with my little eye... a Narito!" a cheerful voice rang out as Yuuki was switching out his shoes. He glanced to the side and wasn't exactly shocked to find Yui waving at him and approaching. "Going home now?"

"Yeah."

Yui gave him a slight smile before she walked past him to her locker and began changing into her casual shoes, as well. Yuuki, meanwhile, shut his locker and headed outside. The sky had been cloudy the entire day, and it was beginning to look like it was going to start pouring at any moment.

"Whoaaa, looks like it's gonna rain soon," Yui, who had appeared beside him, observed. Yuuki was startled by her sudden and unexpected interruption.

"Do you walk to school, Narito? You must live pretty close by then, right?"

"Yeah, I live at the end of Nakamachi Dori Street."

For the most part, Yuuki commuted to school on foot, mostly because he was forced to on account of having totaled his bike when he crashed it into a ditch on the side of the road one drowsy morning. The barest consolation for him was the fact that Higashiseiyou High School wasn't particularly far from his house in the first place. The walk took about 30 minutes if he picked up the pace.

"Oh, really now? I'll be walking to the train station today. Wanna tag along?"

Yuuki couldn't believe what he'd just heard. He'd have understood if she'd made a show of asking during class, considering her reputation, but for her to go out of her way outside of class was completely out of left field to him. Though maybe it was all just a matter of coincidence. Besides, Yuuki didn't see a reason to complain, so he figured he'd take her up on her offer.

"We'd never even talked to each other until this morning, and now look at us go," she said. "Strange how things work out, huh?"

Yui maintained her usual bright smile as they passed through the school's front gate. As the distance between them and the school grew, and

the number of students became sparser, Yui's posture and general demeanor became much more relaxed.

"Yeah, you're right," Yuuki replied, completely failing to carry on the conversation. He was always the type of guy to simply keep to himself, although the fact that this situation was completely novel to him didn't help.

"So tell me, which devil do I have to make a deal with to heal you from being so tongue-tied?" Yui joked. She'd finally grown tired of his constant silence and was now peeking at his face from the side.

"You want me to say something?"

"Uhhhh, yeah? Got any interesting stories? Anything will do," she pleaded, clearly not realizing the absurdity of the task she'd just bestowed upon Yuuki.

He had to actively suppress the urge to turn her down. After all, if he were to keep insisting that he was an "average high school student," he figured it'd be a good idea if he showed her that he was in fact capable of holding a conversation.

"I have one that's related to the book I was reading this morning."

"What about it?"

"It talked about the spirit of "ressentiment" which is fundamental for slave morality, and—"

"I'm sorry, you lost me there," she interjected, shutting him down.

While she did indeed say that anything was fine, this particular topic was clearly too sophisticated for even the most seasoned of philosophers. Yuuki felt a smug satisfaction knowing that Yui wouldn't be able to tease him about it. He briefly fell back into his own inner world before being dragged back to reality by Yui.

"I usually go to school on my bike unless it's gonna rain," she said, unprompted. "Your house is still a bit further away, right? Do you have an umbrella on you?"

"Forgot to bring one with me before going to school. What's the worst that could happen anyway? Getting drenched?"

Yuuki was well aware that he could avoid such a wet fate with a quick trip to the convenience store, but he wasn't keen on wasting money.

"Oooh? Then I'll be the good guy and share mine with you if it ever comes to that," she brandished her umbrella as though it was a sword and stared down her next victim.

Yuuki was unsure about how to reply and hesitated, but Yui's contented sigh saved him from having to say anything in the first place.

"That's what you get for what you pulled this afternoon," she said.

"Sorry?"

"If you hurt me, I'll hurt you twice as much!"

"You what?" Yuuki asked, utterly confused. Before he could even begin to make sense of what she'd just said, rain suddenly began to pour down. Yui quickly opened her umbrella and gave him a meaningful look.

"Out with it now," she said, "I'll let you under it with me if you ask nicely enough."

"Keep dreaming."

"Have fun getting drenched then!" she mocked, sticking her tongue out.

Yui took a few steps away from Yuuki, who himself was distracted with trying to figure out the best way to avoid getting soaked. The rain was closer to a drizzle than anything, and he thought that if he picked up the pace, he could make it to cover in time. Just as abruptly as the rain had begun, though, it'd stopped falling on his clothes. It took him a moment, but he glanced to the side and finally realized that Yui had chosen to approach him after all. She was struggling to hold her umbrella up to shield them both from the rain.

"It'd be so much easier for me if you held this thing," she complained.

Yui was now barely an inch away from Yuuki. She was shorter than him, barely reaching up to his chin as they awkwardly huddled together under the umbrella.

Yuuki took the chance to eye her up from head to toe before finally speaking, "You look great."

"Haha, very funny."

He wasn't joking. He remembered he'd grown to about 5'8" in last year's physical exam, so that meant that Yui was probably somewhere around 5'3". Her high waist hinted at long legs that were concealed below her skirt. His eyes were also drawn to her arm that was still straining to hold up the umbrella. It, too, was dainty and slender.

A memory flashed through Yuuki's mind. He remembered having a long and serious conversation with Keitarou about how the curves of a woman's waist and butt were sexy or something along those lines. Yuuki couldn't help but tremble at what Keitarou would say if he saw him in this situation.

All the guys in class have a thing for her, which made Yuuki feel restless enough that he eventually decided to step out from under the umbrella.

"Why are you running away from me?"

"The rain really isn't that bad."

"What? Ooh, I see how it is. You're embarrassed, aren't you?" she said with a grin, pointing her finger at Yuuki. She looked elated, as if she had got him figured out.

The reality was that the rain was letting up and actually stopped right after he'd left the safety of the umbrella.

"You've got to be kidding me. There's no way—" Yui insisted as she extended her hand so she could check the intensity of the rainfall. "Whaaaaaa—?!" she exclaimed, bending backwards in surprise. Yuuki watched her in silence as she flushed a bright red and folded her umbrella back up. "Ahem... So that was an overreaction on my part."

"It was funny... sort of."

"I'm not hearing any laughter. Throw me a bone; even a fake smile will work. Are you sure you're not just a robot or something? Beep-Boop?"

"I'm just not very expressive. I can assure you that I'm busting a gut laughing, though. On the inside."

"You sure you got that right? It honestly sounds like you're making fun of me."

"Wouldn't dream of it. For real."

"Alright then, show me that million-dollar smile," Yui said with a solemn expression and moved uncomfortably close to Yuuki. Even someone as detached as him would wince a bit after seeing her acting so serious about it. Though for the life of him, he still couldn't understand why she was getting so impatient, or why she even cared this much about him in general. He had a bad feeling about it, but all of a sudden, a brilliant idea flashed through his head.

"You know, I'm a big fan of detective and mystery fiction," he said.

"Okay?"

"Been reading them so much that I feel confident in my ability to think like criminals do, figuring out their plans and stuff. You could say I'm really good at making educated guesses."

"If you say so, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Want me to guess what you're thinking right now?"

“Wha—? You can do that? Sounds fun. The floor is all yours!” Yui chirped with unbridled enthusiasm, totally on board with his idea. There was even a faint hint of surprise coloring her expression, considering this was the first time Yuuki had taken the initiative and brought up a topic of his own volition.

“I’ve got you all figured out. You’re playing a game where you try to make your seatmate fall in love with you!” he claimed with confidence and pointed his finger at her.

Yui’s eyes had been twinkling with anticipation up until that point, but upon his declaration, some of that light vanished, and she tilted her head to the side. She looked unconvinced at first, but it didn’t take long for her to swing her arm in an exaggerated manner and point right back at him.

“You are correct,” she answered quietly.

They stood there with their fingers almost touching before Yuuki finally brought his arm down. Yui slowly did the same soon after.

“... Or so you might think. Sorry to rain on your parade, Sherlock.”

“Don’t give me that. I know I got it right.”

“Fake news. Of all of the things you could’ve said, that was the best you could come up with?! What made you even think such a thing? Actually, riddle me this too while you’re at it, detective. What do I gain from playing around like that?”

“Elementary, my dear Yui. It’s because you find it amusing, or something along those lines?”

While Yuuki was still not entirely sure of her true motivations, her behavior only made sense if this was what she was aiming at. Not to mention that, from where Yuuki was standing, she now looked like a criminal struggling in vain to justify themselves after being exposed by the good guy.

“You should’ve set your sights on some cheerful, up-and-coming guy.”

“Are your ears clogged or something?” Yui demanded. “I already told you that’s a load of bogus. Just thinking about it gives me the creeps!”

“Then why do you insist on following me around?” he asked without an ounce of hesitation. He thought that this would have struck a nerve, but much to his surprise, he was only met with a puzzled look.

“I dunno what you’re talking about. Oh wait, now I get it. So you’re basically saying that you’ve fallen for me?” she glanced up at him with a cheeky smile.

And with that, Yuuki couldn't contain his laughter any longer.

"I made you laugh! Mission accomplished!" she cheered.

"Yeah, you got me. That was pretty good."

"Hmmm? But you do know I was being serious, right?" she teased triumphantly.

Yuuki realized that she would probably fall into a serious misunderstanding if he stayed silent, so he decided it was best to play along a bit and simultaneously clear the air.

"I'll do you one better," he said. "You're planning to make me fall in love with you just so you can turn me down when I confess to you, aren't you? Not cool."

"Excuse me? Where did you get that from?" she questioned, the anger clear in her voice. It was the first time he'd ever heard her use this tone.

Now that he thought about it, Yuuki's source on this matter was Keitarou. He couldn't actually be sure if it had any truth to it or not. He realized he might have offended her.

"I'm sorry. Forget I said anything," his apology was quick and tinged with regret.

"Suspicious. Makes me want to forget it less. Maybe I should go ahead with my 'game,' after all."

"What?" he asked, reflexively turning his gaze at her.

"Well, you know, I just thought your smile was kinda cute. Got my heart skipping a beat and everything," she smiled teasingly. She then once again pointed at Yuuki, who was now in utter disarray. "Gotcha! You should see your face right now! You head-over-heels yet? No, but seriously, I've actually been interested in you for a while now. We just never really had a chance to talk, so I'm happy that we've ended up becoming seatmates," she finished her confession bashfully.

The game had already been set, and she had just made her first move. Yuuki was aware that she would sweep the whole board if he just sat idly by and watched, and thus he opted to call her on her bluff and asked a question of his own.

"And why are you interested in me exactly?"

"Because you always look all bored by yourself, like you're holding back. It's super mysterious! Like, everyone in class has their own group, but you're always choosing to be by yourself, and nobody approaches you

because of it. So obviously I got a little curious about what sort of person you really are."

It was too compelling of a reason for it to have been made up on the spot. However, she had made one grave mistake: she assumed that he was an introvert with no friends, let alone a girlfriend. That he was so depressed and dissatisfied with his life that he forgot how to laugh or smile. The reality of the situation was much less dramatic. Yuuki was simply sleepy most of the time in class and never bothered to engage with anyone of his own accord. While he was apathetic in general, he had no problems with his current school life. In other words, it's not that deep.

If anything, she was at least right about him being alone most of the time, but it wasn't as if it bothered him.

"But yeah, now that I've talked to you, you're kinda fun to have around, and I really want to get to know you more," Yui said.

"I don't particularly see myself as a bundle of joy, but suit yourself."

"Don't sell yourself short! I've been having a good time, even with all the awkward pauses between each conversation."

"Uh-huh..." he responded, still perplexed at her words. He wasn't sure if she was being truly sincere or merely toying with him as Keitarou would have said. Once again, he figured that it would be troublesome if she misjudged his character, so he proceeded to explain his way of thinking to her. "I think you have the wrong idea. I don't mind being boring or whatever as long as I get to do my own thing. I mean, if you're healthy, have food on your plate and a roof over your head, what more could you want?"

"Wow, and you said you *weren't* into philosophy?"

"I'm just repeating what my mother used to tell me. The older I get, the more I see the wisdom in it."

"Oh, I guess she's serious about raising you well. She must be strict on you with all kinds of things, huh?"

"Not anymore. She passed away due to illness three years ago," he said nonchalantly. It no longer was that big a deal for him, but the revelation must have come as a shock to Yui, whose head drooped in shame.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"No need to apologize."

Yui didn't expect him to react with any amount of consideration for her, which made her even more depressed. Yuuki, meanwhile, knew that a lively

girl like her shouldn’t be making such a sad expression. It brought up bad memories that he had long forgotten, memories that actively blocked his path to happiness. He gathered himself together and instinctively extended his arm, gently placing his hand on top of her soft brown hair.

“It’s all right, trust me,” he said calmly, as though he was comforting a child.

A moment of silence passed as he patted her head before Yui slowly raised her head in an effort to understand what was happening. She was frozen in place, and her face was becoming more and more red as the gears turned in her head. She suddenly jerked head side to side, causing Yuuki to pull back his arm in a hurry.

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“H-Hey now, what’s the big idea here?!” she demanded, “Why did you put your hand on...”

“Ah, my bad. Just a habit.”

“A what now? You pat girls’ heads like this all the time?”

“Well, err... kind of? I do it to my little sister mostly, but anyway, you sure you’re okay? You’re as red as a tomato.”

“It’s nothing! All fine and dandy here, yup! You just took me by surprise is all!”

“I see. As long as you’re okay.”

“It’s *not* okay to do this! Don’t you ever dare go around carelessly touching girls’ heads, capiche?! The only ones who would fall for that are harem anime chicks, you hear me?!” she snapped at him, continuing her rant until she was absolutely sure that he got the idea.

Yuuki just kept staring at her face, worried about how abnormally red it was becoming. His curious stares grew to be too much for her, however, and she soon turned her back to him to avoid any further eye contact.

“Damn it! You think that poker face of yours is gonna get to me?! I’ll make you regret this! You’ll see!” she grumbled.

That was the last thing she uttered before she beat a hasty retreat, leaving a dumbfounded Yuuki in the dust.

Chapter Two

Big Brother's Day

Ten minutes had passed since Yuuki and Yui had parted ways. He made his way through the city, eventually taking an opposite turn midway through the road leading from the school to the train station, and finally reaching a residential area consisting of rows of apartment buildings. He hurried through the entrance of his five-story building in an effort to avoid any potential rain. Once inside, he passed through the lobby and opted to take the stairs to reach his second floor apartment rather than use the elevator, which was currently stuck at a higher floor.

He shared his apartment with his father and his little sister. The apartment itself consisted of a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, and a veranda.

Speaking of his father, his routine consisted of waking up early in the morning in order to commute to his workplace downtown, so he was inevitably destined for a late arrival back home more often than not. To make matters even worse, he had been assigned on a long-term business trip that forced him to rent an apartment in Kansai, making him only able to see his children once during the weekend, if that. As a result, Yuuki mostly lived alone together with his sister Mina, who was three years younger than him.

When Yuuki unlocked the door and entered the apartment, he noticed that Mina's shoes were nowhere to be found. Not only that, but the place was eerily silent, and all the lights had been turned off.

Maybe she got sidetracked on the way home? Yuuki thought to himself. As soon as he walked into the living room, however, a loud bang echoed throughout the place. The apartment that he had initially thought was empty was now suddenly bathed in light, as his little sister briskly leapt at him, party popper in hand.

"Ta-da! Lookie here! I made you a birthday cake all by myself! Are you surprised, or are you surprised?" she asked, excitedly pointing to the dining table. Her outfit wasn't as questionable as it normally was; right now, she was simply dressed in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts.

"The second one," Yuuki responded.

“Yay, I did it! I surprised Yukkie! Woo-hoo!” She celebrated, skipping around joyfully before proceeding to latch onto Yuuki’s arm and pulling him toward the table. Yuuki offered no resistance as he was dragged along by her. He sat himself down into the chair she had prepared for him and stared at the birthday cake she’d created. Laid in front of him was a frosted swiss roll cake decorated from top to bottom with canned fruits, which made it look quite heavy on the stomach. While Yuuki never would’ve expected Mina to have actually baked a cake all on her own, it was, nonetheless, a welcome surprise.

“No need to hold back! Dig right in~!”

“It’s not my birthday today, Mina.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s for your pre-birthday party.”

“You mean a *post*-birthday party.”

“Doesn’t matter! Who said it was illegal to eat a birthday cake outside your birthday, anyways?”

“How progressive of you.”

Mina cupped her chin in her hand and glared at Yuuki. She pondered her next move now that her vigor had been sapped by Yuuki’s calm and collected demeanor.

“If the birthday thing isn’t working for you, then how about... Aha, I got it! You know how we have Mother’s Day and Daddy’s Day? I think we can get away with having a Big Brother’s Day, too!”

“Don’t call it Daddy’s Day.”

“We already have the cake and everything, so we should make this your day and celebrate it! Let’s hear it for Yukkie! Hip hip hooray!” she cheered his name with enthusiasm, paying no attention to any possible protests since her mind was already set on having a party of some kind.

At least she’s having fun, Yuuki decided not to sweat the finer details. Besides, she was always an energetic one, and once she had made up her mind, nobody could convince her otherwise. Hence arguing with her on every little thing was simply not an option. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that his current indifference was a by-product of his interactions with her.

“I’d feel guilty if I had all of it by myself, though.”

“No worries! I already devoured some earlier.”

“So I was late to the party after all, huh? Also, you don’t use that word there. You could’ve just said that you had your share.”

“I gobbled it all up!” she declared while bowing firmly.

The way she spoke sounded *off* at times, but that’s to be expected, seeing as she was still in the middle of refining her speaking habits. It was necessary considering how her word choice tended to be strangely peculiar, and other times just outright weird. Not only did she often misuse words, but she also had a clear problem enunciating Yuuki’s name. Mina struggled with the intonation so much that she ended up creating a nickname for him that was easier for her to pronounce—Yukkie.

“Oh, by the way, I’m already full, so no lunch for me.”

“You must’ve had one heck of a piece.”

Mina pretended she didn’t know what he was talking about as she circled around and finally sat down across from him. Yuuki slowly came to the realization that she was probably afraid that he would get angry with her for making a cake and subsequently eating it all on her own. It would definitely explain the sudden birthday celebration shenanigans, which were clearly just a last-minute excuse to get away with eating cake.

“How is it? Taste good?” she asked, planting her elbows on the table and watching Yuuki cut himself a piece of the cake with his fork.

Mina had charming round eyes, smooth lips, and nearly translucent white skin that only further accentuated her youthfulness. Her face was narrow, and her body was petite to match. She had also recently grown her hair out to shoulder length so that she could wear it up in pigtails. According to the person herself, she apparently wanted to look like some sort of anime character.

“Very. But it might be a little too sweet for my liking,” Yuuki responded.

“Glad to hear it! Hey, can I get a bite?”

“You’ve already eaten more than enough.”

“Aaah...” she ignored him and opened her mouth wide, waiting for him to feed her.

He gave in and scooped up a piece of cake, making sure to get a lot of the icing, before tossing it into her mouth. Her expression softened into a smile.

It’s true Mina was his sister, but Yuuki couldn’t help but admit how good looking and adorable she was... on the outside, at least. Since most girls paled in comparison to her beauty, he'd developed a resistance toward even the most dazzling of women.

Yuuki resembled his father, while Mina was the spitting image of their late mother. The resemblance was even more apparent when looking at their mother's own childhood photos.

Yuuki remembered how his father used to tell them stories about the days when he was still in school and about how their mother was idolised as a princess, akin to a flower far from anyone's reach.

Though unfortunately, the phrase "whom the gods love die young" couldn't ring any truer in her case. While Mina did inherit her mother's pretty face—which happened to be the part about herself she loved the most—she was still a ways away from being an actual princess in terms of her habits.

"I'll bake you one every three days!"

"Not necessary."

Yuuki knew that she meant no harm, even if she was just fooling around. He was convinced that it all came from a good place, after all. She just wanted to take care of her brother and for him to be happy and enjoy himself.

Mina watched him as he finished up his portion and brought the plate into the kitchen, where he promptly rinsed it and left it to soak in the water. He noticed another plate which was covered in whipped cream hidden beside the sink, but decided to turn a blind eye to it, for Mina's sake more than anything. He then returned to the living room and switched on the TV.

Mina followed him in and sat beside him not long after. Before long, she let out a yawn and drifted off to sleep. Yuuki spent the next few hours staring blankly at the screen, watching the news. Eventually, Yuuki glanced at the clock and realized that it was already six o'clock. He considered waking Mina up, who was still indulging in a very sound sleep on the sofa, but recalled that she'd mentioned skipping lunch today.

I guess I'll go make whatever, he thought to himself.

He carefully got up from his seat and headed to the pantry to retrieve a bag of instant ramen. He took a pot out from the cupboards and brought some water to a boil before tossing the noodles into it. He then scoured the fridge for whatever ingredients he could find to enhance the taste. Eggs, bean sprouts, whatever. He let it simmer for a couple of minutes, then carried the entire pot to the table and dug in.

As he ate, he recalled how his father used to nag him about the noodles. Apparently, according to his dad, instant noodles were a poor man's food.

Yuuki put that thought out of his mind as he slurped down the noodles.

“Lemme have some of that,” Mina whispered in his ear. She’d just now appeared in the room and laid her hands on the table beside him.

“What happened to not wanting lunch?”

“Aaaah...” she opened her mouth wide once again.

“I just made it, so you better blow on it before you eat it. Unless you want to burn your tongue and run around the place like a headless chicken, of course,” Yuuki warned as he handed her a pair of chopsticks.

It took some doing, but eventually she was able to control her ardor and slow her pace. She slurped on them idly for a bit before suddenly spinning around and stomping off toward the bathroom.

“I’m gonna go have a bath!” she declared, her mouth still full of food.

“I haven’t prepared the hot water yet.”

“It’s okay! I got it!” she exclaimed loudly, exiting the room with equally noisy steps. She came back just as quickly as she’d left, however, as it seemed she was looking for another mouthful. A few minutes passed as she stayed put in one spot, slurping more of Yuuki’s noodles. It was a bizarre occurrence, considering how she normally acted, but before long, she was once again hurrying off to the bathroom now that the water was ready.

“I have successfully taken a bath!” Mina proclaimed. She’d only been in there for about 10 minutes, but still an abundance of steam spilled out of the bathroom. She stood in front of Yuuki, who was fiddling with his phone, with only a towel wrapped around her.

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“I told you not to walk around the apartment like that...”

In response, Mina let out a bizarre laugh and extended both of her arms. The towel had now lost any semblance of support it had and fluttered gently, and dramatically, to the ground. Her glimmering, bare skin emerged from underneath—her arms, shoulders, hips, and legs flung into view as the only things that served to cover her pristine skin was a set of pink underwear. She wore a daring smile as she looked at Yuuki and didn’t seem to be in any particular hurry to pick the towel back up.

“Worry not, I was wearing something underneath the whole time! If that wasn’t a twist, I don’t know what is!”

“It’s too much, I’m afraid. That’s gonna be a red card for you.”

“Say whaa—? Why though?! I’m wearing some underwear, see? Bought these cuties last time I went shopping! They look great, right? Right?!” she struck a sexy pose as she spoke, lightly pulling on the thin string of her panties.

“Yes. They suit you very well,” he replied casually. He figured that she would undoubtedly be offended if he didn’t agree. The truth was that Yuuki was completely unfazed as always. After all, he was used to seeing her underwear, given that he was the one who always did her laundry.

Mina raised her arms in victory and spun around on the spot as if to show herself off from all angles.

“Yeah, yeah, you got me again. Now put some clothes on, will you?” he demanded.

She picked up her uniform’s blouse that had been lying on the chair. Half of the problem was now solved, but her lower half was still on full display. Despite the addition of clothes into the mix, the situation was becoming more hazardous as Yuuki could now almost make out some sensitive details.

“How about wearing something over the panties, too?”

“Forget it, it’s way too hot right now,” she said, seemingly unbothered about whether Yuuki could see anything “problematic” or not. Unfortunately for everyone involved, this was how she always behaved when fresh out of the bath; she hated how clothes felt afterwards.

Yuuki, being the caring and thoughtful brother that he was, didn’t mind seeing her underwear while he was doing the laundry, but it was a completely different story if she actually had them on. More so now that she had obviously been experiencing a growth spurt. Her waistline was getting

thinner, her buttocks starting to fill out, and her breasts had noticeably gained some volume.

Perhaps the worst of it all was that Mina herself seemed completely oblivious to the changes occurring to her body, evidenced by her nonchalantly sitting with her legs up on the sofa.

"You'll end up catching a cold if you stay like that," he warned her while doing his best to avert his eyes.

"Nuh-uh!"

There was another thing Mina had inherited from their mother: her frail body. Mina always tried to justify sleeping in her underwear by insisting that it helped her get better sleep at night. She did this in spite of the fact that fate itself often did not let her get away with her poor choices—or her usual mischievous behavior—free of repercussions. That is to say, she ended up with the occasional cold.

After spending a good while idling on the sofa, Mina went and retrieved the hair dryer. She asked Yuuki to give her a hand, so he dutifully helped out by running the hot air from the dryer through the backside of her head while helping the process along with his free hand.

Mina had silky-smooth black hair with a particular, sweet smell to it, one that tickled Yuuki's nose. The peculiar thing about that was the fact that they both used the same exact shampoo. As soon as Yuuki finished drying her hair, Mina promptly stood up and beelined for her room, practically slamming the door behind her. She emerged just seconds later with a game console in hand.

"Let's play a quick round, Yukkie!"

"No, I have homework to do," he turned her down. Now that Yuuki had received a firm talking-to from Yui, he couldn't afford to keep slacking on his English homework anymore.

"Whaa—? No way! You can always do that later," she badgered him. Mina had made a routine of talking her brother out of doing homework, and Yuuki knew from experience that she wouldn't stop until she got what she wanted. Perhaps he wasn't entirely blameless, seeing as he had a soft spot for her and always ended up indulging her.

"Fine, you win. But just for a little while, okay? Nothing competitive, though. I don't feel like getting wrecked today."

"Okie-dokie, wanna watch me play a game instead, then?"

“You serious?” he protested at first, but soon relaxed back into his usual self and quietly went along with her suggestion.

Mina connected the console to the TV and plopped herself down right in front of it. Yuuki watched her from behind as the sound of clicking controller buttons filled the room.

“Hey, you got any idea how you get those stars?” she asked.

“Not even a clue,” came his useless reply.

“Oof, I should’ve seen it coming, knowing the stuff you usually play. You love that *Ace Prosecutor* game, right? Dunno why you’ve never finished a single one, though.”

“Ah well, you know how it is. It’s really a game that works much differently than reality. And sometimes the solution to the case tends to be much simpler than I had initially thought,” he explained.

He didn’t understand why that was so funny to her, but Mina struggled to stifle her laughter. Yuuki loved detective and mystery novels, but his speculations always ended up missing the mark, and his sister and father constantly ribbed him for it. He personally only saw it as him reading too much into things, so in his eyes, the treatment he received from his family wasn’t warranted.

Yuuki reflected on this very serious matter within his mind when Mina abruptly flung away the controller and stood up.

“There, there, now. You’re such a cutie, Bro,” she said soothingly, ruffling his hair with her hand. Yuuki then recalled the events of last year which were the trigger to his sister changing the way she referred to him.

“*I feel like you have a childish side to you no matter how much older you get!”*

Her words from back then swirled around in Yuuki’s head. After that, Mina started calling him by that brand new nickname that she had come up with: Yukkie. It had been so long since she had simply called him “Bro” that it conjured up strange feelings within him now.

“Aren’t you gonna continue your game?” Yuuki asked.

“Nah, I’m bored!”

“Then could you at least turn off the TV?”

“Too lazy,” she said as she circled around the back and hugged Yuuki from behind.

They used to play together like this all the time back in the day, but now that her breasts were budding, it posed quite the problem in all sorts of

ways.

“Pats please,” she continued, grabbing his hand and bringing it closer to her head. Yuuki thought of giving her a chop to the head to teach her a lesson, but ultimately he had no choice but to pull back once he saw that she was going to bite him.

Yuuki suddenly recalled the conversation he’d had with Yui just a few hours ago. He figured that he might finally be able to get an answer to his burning question.

“You enjoy this?” he asked as he extended his hand to ruffle his sister’s hair.

“Of course I do!” she answered with a tender smile.

“I thought girls didn’t like it when you touch them so casually.”

“Nah, those girls are just big fat liars. But why’re you asking this?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Yuuki might’ve been expecting too much, however, as Mina’s opinion wasn’t exactly helpful in the slightest. They kept it up for a while until Mina was satisfied and pulled away. Yuuki thought that it was as good a time as any to go take a bath himself, but Mina clearly had other plans, since she was tugging on his shirt to prevent him from doing so.

“Stop it. You’re gonna stretch it out,” he complained while trying to shake her off.

“Sit over there,” Mina demanded with a stern look on her face and pointed at the cushions on the floor. Yuuki listened reluctantly and sat down on his knees facing her.

“Big bro... I have something important to tell you.”

“You can tell me anything,” he responded. It looked awfully important, so he wanted to show her that he would take her seriously. Mina hung her head and waited for a moment before she looked Yuuki in the eyes again, a smile now on her face.

“Thank you for everything, Bro. I love you,” she said without so much as a hint of shyness. While it had come completely out of the blue, Yuuki was nevertheless unfazed. He’d grown accustomed to this aspect of her, too.

“I love you, too,” he replied with a gentle tone and a reassuring smile.

“Yeah, I know,” she said with a nod, puffing her chest with pride. “Just like I know everything else there is to know about you!”

“Like what, exactly?” he inquired. Mina flashed a smirk, looking like she had been waiting for him to ask that particular question the entire time.

“Dad hasn’t changed much even after Mom died, but I know you’ve been doing your best to be on top of everything.”

Mina was being pretty vague, but Yuuki understood exactly what she was trying to say. Their father always left it to their mother to take care of them since he was too busy with his career. Yuuki was well aware that working at a trading firm was intense, and their father had even told them that he may be sent on a business trip to Asia after the current one had concluded. Perhaps these constant expeditions were the reason why Mina hadn’t ever gotten close to her father.

One notable time in the past, Mina had provoked their father by telling him to his face that the only good thing about him was his salary, which understandably made him agitated. It angered him not solely because of the surface reasons, but also because Mina had merely been repeating her mother’s oft-spoken words without truly understanding their meaning.

Their mother’s death had a major effect on the whole family. Her last words on her deathbed still rang clear in Yuuki’s mind.

“*Look out for your dad, and take good care of your sister,”* she had uttered.

In some ways, it was like a will, one that Yuuki took to heart. He ensured that he didn’t cause any needless trouble for his father. He took care of the housework, including all of Mina’s needs to the best of his ability. He even went as far as outwardly pretending that everything was fine. One of the most recent examples was when he told his father that he was perfectly capable of holding down the fort by himself during his latest business trip, even though he was feeling anxious to no end.

“Thank you again, Yukkie,” Mina bowed her head in gratitude. “And thanks for making food you aren’t used to cooking just for me.”

“It’s all good. Would appreciate it more if you didn’t keep leaving all those leftovers on your plate.”

Yuuki didn’t much care about what he put in his own body, but he went way out of his way to prepare tasty dishes specifically for Mina.

“You tend to be sloppy and clumsy, but I know how much effort you’ve been putting into cleaning and doing the laundry,” she continued.

“Then what say you help me out by folding your own underwear?” he proposed, indicating the remaining laundry that was still dangling on the laundry lines at the side of the room.

“Mm! Yeah, I’ve decided that I’m gonna help you with the housework from here on out!”

“I’ll be praying the place doesn’t go up in flames.”

Yuuki wanted to keep Mina as far from the stove as possible, especially after she’d added burning the carpet with an iron to her record.

“Anyways... thank you for everything you do for me, Big Bro. “

“What is with all this... gratitude? Is this where... we part ways?”

“Wha—? What’s wrong? Are you... crying, Bro?”

“Nope.”

Yuuki tried to lean into it like it was a moving scene straight out of some kind of sappy soap opera, but it was never meant to be on account of the pair of panties in the shot. The whole thing seemed a bit absurd to Yuuki to begin with, and he had serious doubts about whether this was the type of conversation you’d delay someone’s bath time for.

“Ugh! You do this every time I try to be sincere!” she snapped at his tepid attitude and threw her hands up in the beginnings of a tantrum.

“I don’t know what you want from me.”

“Anywho, what I *wanted* to say was that this is the last day that you’re my big brother! You’ll be reborn on this very first Big Brother’s Day!”

“What are you talking about?”

“See, you always prioritize me, and so because of that, you’re kind of a loner without a girlfriend or even any friends... You poor thing.”

Yuuki thought that that was quite the exceptional misunderstanding for somebody who had only just claimed that they knew everything about their older brother. Then again, it wasn’t exactly easy for Yuuki to confess that he was never good at making friends in the first place. Still, he would’ve appreciated it if she hadn’t pegged him as a total loser.

The truth of the matter was that he never felt like he missed out on anything substantial without friends, since he always got to spend time with Mina, whether it was going shopping or just hanging out somewhere. Besides, he was sure that it was just as enjoyable for Mina as it was for him.

Mina, meanwhile, acted all rowdy at home, but would become incredibly timid once she was outside. She never did any sort of gossiping about any of her classmates, let alone brought any of her friends home. Yuuki was particularly incensed when one day, she was elated about the fact that she had spent the whole day at school without engaging with a single person, though Yuuki wasn’t exactly one to talk.

“Look, I know you love me to bits and everything, but what would the neighbours think?” Mina continued. “Fat chance you’d be able to land a job if everybody knew you were some weirdo who’s obsessed with his sister.”

“You for real?”

“Sure am. That’s why we gotta put some distance between us. I’m gonna work on making some friends, while you go and get yourself a girlfriend!”

“Hold up, what even is that logic? Why do I have to get a girlfriend?”

“You’re the oldest, so you get a handicap.”

“That’s too high-level,” he said, dejected. Mina’s mind appeared to be set in stone, however, and she got up off her knees and leaned in closer to Yuuki.

“By the by, is there a girl you’re just completely smitten with?” she asked with a curious look on her face.

“Smitten is a bit much.”

“Fine. Someone you’re interested in then?”

Yui’s flushed face came to mind for whatever reason when Mina asked him that, but that was to be expected, given that she was the only girl in class that he’d ever interacted with. As far as he could remember, she was actually the most talkative girl he’d ever come across in high school.

“I guess, but I don’t think she sees me that way. She’s way too out of my league.”

“So miracles *do* happen!”

“Hold your horses. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Reeally now?” she teased with an amused look.

“Listen, I don’t need a girlfriend to be happy. Just seeing you healthy is enough for me,” he said, once again hastening to nip any misunderstandings in the bud.

“If *that’s* enough to make you happy, then I can totally see you literally exploding with joy if you got yourself an actual girlfriend.”

“Not too keen on exploding with anything. Anyway, I’m happy that you’re worried about me, and that’s all I will ever need.”

“Whaa—? You’re gonna make me blush, hahaha...” she laughed and scratched her head in embarrassment. It was a rare sight to see her flustered, and it put a smile on Yuuki’s face. Mina then turned her back to him and pushed herself onto his lap.

“See? I’m all perfectly fit and healthy!” she said.

“I’m glad that’s the case.”

“I’m doing alright now. But I’d feel even better if you were happy.”

Mina had come a long way since the gloomy mess she was when their mother had died. At the time, she wasn’t eating properly, wasn’t talking to anyone, and she’d shut herself in her room all day, not even leaving to attend school. Yuuki was with her every step of the way, just like he had promised his mother. He was the comforting shoulder for when she needed to cry. He held her gently and patted her head until she eventually regained her dazzling smile once again. That was all Yuuki ever wanted: for her to be healthy, and for her smile to never fade.

“Can my girlfriend be 2D?”

“Not a chance! *Anyway,”* she enunciated the last word clearly, exaggerating the emphasis on each syllable, “you’re reborn starting from today! Happy Big Brother’s Day to you!”

“Big Brother’s Day is on a whole nother level,” he said while gently caressing her hair.

The issue at hand had still not been resolved, however. Getting a girlfriend was no easy task.

◆◇

“Yukkie, lemme wash your back!”

“I’m good,” his unamused voice rang against the echoey walls of the bathroom.

I was finally able to say it today, she thought to herself. *It’s fine. I’m okay. I’m his healthy and cheerful little sister. I can take care of myself on my own.* Mina continued muttering to herself until her heartbeats quieted down.

Big Bro... she silently called for him once more, resting her back against the door of the bathroom, and listening to the sounds of running water coming from within.

Chapter Three

Seatmate Phobia

That same night, Yui found herself tossing and turning in bed, failing to get even a single wink of sleep. Despite appearances, this was how her nights typically went after a seat rearrangement in class. Instead of the pleasant nothingness of sleep, Yui's mind was filled with memories of her childhood, particularly the ones from fourth grade.

"Ugh, I got a seat next to that loner. This is the worst!"

She vividly recalled the words of the boy who sat next to her, as he'd purposefully spoken in a voice too loud to be a whisper.

In the past, Yui mostly kept to herself. She was on the quiet side, not particularly good at holding conversations, and was generally an introverted girl. She was so shy that she couldn't even properly smile at people. Naturally, she had no friends and consequently spent her free time in class doodling anime and manga characters in her notebook. She immersed herself in anime, manga, and video games on her days off, as well. She could never stand up for herself, and it wasn't unusual for her to spend most of her days crying when she arrived home from school.

Yui eventually grew to hate seat changes and school altogether. She was invariably afraid of what the person sitting next to her might say or do and lived in constant fear of it all repeating itself with each subsequent seat change. Eventually, she'd reached her wits' end and had decided to consult the person she considered to be the most dependable and closest to her at the time: her older sister.

"Why don't you just try being more sociable, then?" her sister suggested.

In retrospect, her sister didn't really seem to fully understand the situation and hence gave Yui some criminally obvious advice. But at the time, it made all the sense in the world. There was, in fact, a cheerful girl that fit that exact description in her class back then, and she was so popular that everyone was eager to spend time with her.

Yui began researching how to become a fun, outgoing person. The research involved reading gag manga, watching entertainers on streaming websites, and even following stand-up comedians alongside an ample amount of variety shows.

She was intent on changing herself, but the leap from a quiet, timid girl to a funny, interesting one was too great. Before long, she fell into a routine of sitting back and enjoying these shows rather than using them to improve herself.

"I thought you were serious about this thing. At any rate, I don't care if you're faking it or not, but just start smiling more at people," her sister admonished. Yui was unwilling, but would ultimately do as she was told. Luckily enough, things worked out, and the people sitting next to her eventually stopped bad-mouthing her.

Before she realized it, she began cracking jokes around people, a result of all the shows she had watched. She started making friends—a feat she'd never imagined—and grew to become the upbeat person that she was today. Everything was going to plan... until things took an unexpected turn in middle school.

Guys began confessing their love to her, even when all she did was greet them with a smile. At the same time, they all began to shun that other, previously popular, girl.

Yui never took note of how she came off to others and only focused on making sure her seatmate didn't hate her. However, her happy and friendly behavior backfired consistently, as she became too much for boys to handle. It didn't take long for her to become extremely popular with the guys of her class—or at least, that was what her friend told her. Yui didn't think that was possible, though.

Fast-forward a few dozen confessions, and Yui had finally had enough. She wanted nothing more than to engage with people normally. Fate had other plans in store for her, however, and her position in class looked to have been set in stone. She understood the consequences of being overly-friendly, yet still couldn't help but feel guilty if she avoided talking to her seatmate. She felt pressured to do so, especially when everyone in class was always having fun chatting together. It eventually became an obsession, one she couldn't get rid of: a seatmate phobia.

At this point, her past introverted self was nothing but a distant memory. A part of her wished to go back to those days; if only she could remember her old self. Her current personality felt like an act, but the personality change was so deep-rooted that she didn't know how to turn it off anymore.

Nevertheless, it wasn't as if she hated the way she was now, and she still believed it to be an improvement over her gloomy past. The only true

remnant that withstood the test of time was that she still abhorred seat changes in class.

Yui let out a deep sigh and turned over to the other side of the bed. This time around, she couldn't get any sleep not because of the seat rearrangement itself, but specifically because of who ended up sitting next to her.

"You're playing a game where you try to make your seatmate fall in love with you!"

His claim from earlier in the day echoed through her head. She couldn't help but laugh each time she recalled that confident expression of his, as if he had just solved the riddle of the century.

A game of all things? Maybe he is a bit of a dummy, after all... Still funny though, honestly! she thought to herself, a subconscious smile creeping over her face. She didn't mind that he was a bit of a dunce; it was what happened afterwards that weighed heavily on her mind. As far as she could tell, nobody had ever patted her head before. In other words, Yuuki stole her first time. And when she was least expecting it, no less.

He was unexpectedly good at it too! It felt kinda nice to be honest, and his voice was so gentle, she mulled over it. She suspected that he was some kind of professional, secluding himself deep in the mountains for years on end just so he could perfect his head-patting technique.

He mentioned that he had a little sister as well. Didn't take him for the older brother type. She never pegged him as someone who would pull that kind of stunt, and it was so unexpected that she couldn't help but have panicked at the time. Her face turned red just from thinking about how unsightly she must've looked. She was certain that Yuuki now thought of her as someone who got embarrassed over the slightest things.

Just what was he thinking! she protested, holding her head in her hands and kicking her feet against the bed.

She went over all of the events that occurred throughout the day so that she could better understand how it all reached this point. She was interested in him, and they both happened to sit next to each other. She struck up a conversation as she normally would, and surprisingly enough, they got on pretty well. They happened to go home together after class, which was when it happened: the moment that had been living rent-free in her head ever since.

I gotta snap out of it! That was just the first time we've ever even spoken to each other! Even girls you see in harem anime wouldn't fall for someone so easily! she affirmed herself, insisting that these jumbled feelings of embarrassment were only because he caught her off-guard and nothing more. *That guy is gonna get it!*

Yui's anger at Yuuki only grew stronger when she imagined him enjoying a good night's rest after making her feel so distressed. She had quite a competitive side to her, one that was now fired up and rearing to give him a taste of his own medicine.

If you hurt me, I'll hurt you twice—no, four times as much! she decided with determination. And with that, the seatmate love game had now begun in full.

The main question was how she was going to manage it. After a long night of pondering it, she finally had her plan. When the first rays of light shone in through the window, she sprang out of bed and scurried to the kitchen. She then proceeded to get to making two lunch boxes for her insidious plan.

Maybe I shouldn't, after all... This is kinda taking it too far, she hesitated. It was too drastic of a measure, no matter which way she looked at it. It was like she was reaching for the nuclear codes in response to a war that had only just begun.

"But anyway, you sure you're okay? You're as red as a tomato."

Yuuki's words surfaced to the forefront of her mind just as she was about to call the whole thing off. Any doubts she may have had instantly dissipated, and her spirit was ignited once more.

This means war, so let's set the world on fire, she thought. Then she spoke aloud, her voice full of resolve, "That was the first time that anybody's made fun of me like that." Yui would make sure that Yuuki regretted ever making an enemy out of her.

"What are you talking about so early in the morning?"

"Eek!"

Yui spun toward the source of the sudden voice. There stood her older sister Maki, still in her pajamas, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Maki was four years older than Yui and was a university student. She had a penchant for going at her own pace with anything she did, and she was the type of beauty that exuded a comfy aura. Maki always had a smile on her face, and Yui loved her as that kind older sister. The reality was worlds apart from

this image though, as she was actually a glasses-wearing brute in sheep's clothing.

"*Yaawn*, so what are you making there?" she asked in her charming voice.

She had just woken up, as evidenced by her messy, fluffy hair that she was combing with her hand. She squinted to get a better look at her surroundings, being that she had neither her glasses nor her contacts on, and slowly approached Yui.

"Ah, you made so much food. You even made me some too? Aww, you're such an adorable kid. I love you!"

"You got it all wrong," Yui quickly declared. She then shifted herself to the side as she tried to hide the lunch boxes she was in the middle of making. This was a solid break from either of their routines, so to Maki, they must have looked very suspicious sitting there on the counter.

"Then who's that other one for? Wait, don't tell me. You finally got yourself a boyfriend?" she joked. Her jab startled Yui so much that she dropped the chopsticks she was holding. Despite this painful blunder, she still did her best to play it cool while she snatched them off the ground and rinsed them off in the sink.

"O-Of course not! You must still be half-asleep! Come on, wake up!"

"Huh? Oh, you definitely got a boyfriend, then. For real? Is he handsome? You got a picture of him?"

Maki's transformation happened in about the span of a second; it was so quick that it struck fear into poor Yui's heart. Her older sister's once-relaxed face tensed up, and her typically laid-back tone became much more frantic. She wasn't going to let up until she got what she was looking for.

"I-I just told you that I don't!"

"You're lying. I can read you like a book. Maybe try working on your poker face a little, kiddo."

"Like... a book?" Yui parroted as she slapped both of her hands to her puffy cheeks. Try as she might, she wasn't able to figure out exactly what kind of face she'd been making.

"So you finally found him, huh? Your ideal boyfriend?" Maki asked with an ominous smirk on her face.

"My what?"

"Yui's ideal boyfriend." That phrase alone was enough to render Yui motionless. She could do nothing but expect the worst from her sister and

the wide grin she bore.

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about," Yui claimed unconvincingly.

"Playing dumb, are we? Let me remind you with this old chirp you posted."

Maki got her smartphone out, tapped around on the screen a bit, then slid her finger across it in one smooth motion. A malicious look appeared on her face as she began to read the post aloud.

"'My ideal boyfriend: Hates crowds. Doesn't have many friends. Looks sleepy all the time. Has a poker face more often than not, but still looks cute when smiling. Taller than me, but not too much. Has to have a nice figure. Has to have attractive hands. Has to have black hair, preferably on the curly side. Has beautiful lashes. Has a deep voice. Doesn't speak much, but his voice must be sexy. He must be cool, but oddly somewhat of a dunce. Has to be honest. Must be an older brother with a younger sibling. Must be caring and have a good relationship with his family. Knows his way around housework. Can cook'—"

"Aaah! S-Stop!"

"'Understands references to anime. Reads difficult books. Doesn't seem interested in relationships, but warms up to it once we start dating. Pats my head. Has a rough past that he doesn't speak about.' My god, got goosebumps just reading that. Better keep your yucky fetishes in check, Yui."

"H-How do you know about that?!"

"You left your laptop open that one time, so I just took the liberty of following you," she explained and gave an overly enthusiastic thumbs up to Yui.

"Aaah! I gotta lock it! I really gotta lock my screen!"

"You are already followed."

Yui tried to close the distance and nearly leapt over the counter to try and snatch Maki's smartphone away. Unfortunately, Maki raised her arm up way high out of Yui's reach. Yui, eventually realizing that she'd accomplished nothing other than rubbing her breasts against the counter, took a hesitant step back.

"So basically, you're lustin' for a guy who's some creepy, pretentious loner? And by the way, you sorta start contradicting yourself halfway

through... Nobody like this exists in real life. All those girly manga must've fried your brain."

"Th-That's not true! I met someone who's almost exactly like that!"

"Really now? But you just said you didn't have a boyfriend."

"J-Just shut *up*! Leave me alone! Ahhh!"

"Great reactions as always, Yui. You're so cute, I could just eat you up!"

"Wh-What are you doing now? Stop this! Ugh!" she protested as Maki began to grope her butt. WIth some effort, she wiggled away from her sister's tyrannical grasp.

Maki looked dejected as her gaze fell to Yui's hips, but she suddenly put on a serious face and said, "You'll be doing much more than just touching if you get yourself a boyfriend, you know? You can't be getting this embarrassed right out the gate."

"That serious tone doesn't help your case as much as you think it does."

"Aww, I can't believe my little sister that I spent years lookin' after is gonna end up getting snatched away by some random dude off the streets! But I guess it makes sense for someone to have their eyes on you. Did you know that the Yu in Yui comes from the word 'c*yu*te'? You're practically irresistible!"

"I didn't, actually," she clarified, hurling hostile glances in response to Maki's cheesy joke. Her glares did nothing to hinder Maki's wide smile.

"They do say that the quickest way to a man's heart is through his stomach and all, but..." she paused as she gave the kitchen another once-over, "I personally think you can get him in the palm of your hand if you —" she leaned her body uncomfortably close to Yui and breathily whispered her next words into her ear, "—told him that you loved him."

Yui trembled and let out an involuntary yelp as a chill ran down her spine.

"See? Works like a charm," Maki teased, completely satisfied with Yui's reaction.

"Y-You... You witch!"

"Though that does tend to complicate things, so I wouldn't try it, personally."

"I would never do something so gross, either!"

"Don't be like that. Let's have a bit of fun with that naughty body of yours, missy," she said. She extended her hands toward Yui's chest with

wicked intentions, leaving Yui no choice but to cover herself with both arms.

"I don't think it's a matter of never doing it or not," Maki said with a sigh. "It's just impossible for you. Too embarrassing for little ol' Yui."

"Th-That's what *you* think! I'm sure I can pull it off if I really felt like it... You hear me?!"

"Haha," Maki sneered. Yui was helpless against her and could only give in to her fate as being naught more than a toy for Maki, who knew her inside and out. "More importantly, I'm worried that you're gonna get tamed by some weirdo... But I guess I'm a bit too late, what with how you're acting and everything..."

"O-Of course I won't! What does that even *mean*? Can we not make weird innuendos so early in the morning, please?"

"Big words coming from someone as red as a tomato right now."

"... Tomato?"

Yui had managed to grow accustomed to smiling more, but she was never able to overcome her bashfulness. Her smile was a honed and formidable weapon that would instakill any man that was unfortunate enough to be in her line of sight. As a result, none of the guys ever retaliated, and Yui never had to work on conquering her shyness.

"W-We'll see who gets flustered when I have him wrapped around my finger!"

"Hmmm? So you haven't even told him your feelings yet? I like that set-up! You're getting your sister all jealous!"

"Ah, no, no, forget I said anything. It was just a joke! Haha! There was no guy to begin with!"

"Of course there wasn't. So anyways, what's he like? I'm excited to hear all about him!"

"... Are your ears clogged or something?" her voice trailed off as her sister ran off giggling. Yui stood in the kitchen with her head drooped, succumbing to the fact that her sister had now acquired brand-new material she could tease her with.

This is all his fault. All of it! she thought to herself. *I won't pull my punches anymore. He's definitely gonna pay now!* As these thoughts continued to bolster her confidence, she finished putting the final touches on the lunch boxes, a daring smile plastered on her face.

Chapter Four

Lunch Box

Yuuki made it to the classroom just on time and let out a big sigh of relief as he made his way to his desk. The second he sat down, Yui flashed him a friendly smile.

"Mornin'!" she greeted him with a wave of her hand.

Yuuki was taken aback by her drastic change in mood from yesterday's. She seemed to be in good spirits today rather than flustered and slightly irritated. Though Yui seemed to be feeling better today, Yuuki still regretted patting her without consent, regardless of the fact that he'd had no ill intentions.

"Sorry about yesterday," he said. "Don't know what came over me."

"Yesterday? What happened yesterday?" she said, tilting her head slightly in faux confusion. Yuuki thought he saw her face twitch for a split second, but he dismissed it as a product of his imagination.

Maybe she's the forgetful type, he thought. Then there was no need to bring up the past if the person in question wasn't bothered by it, he concluded. Now that that issue was more or less resolved, he began taking out textbooks from his bag and organizing them on his desk.

"Here, this is for you," said Yui cheerily from the periphery of Yuuki's awareness.

Yuuki wasn't listening; he was preoccupied with the English homework he wasn't able to get done yesterday on account of a certain someone. English was still a couple periods away, so Yuuki figured he'd secretly chip away at it during the preceding classes before Yui had a chance to get mad at him again.

"I said, this is for you!" her tone was much more insistent this time.

"Hm?"

Yuuki peeled his eyes from his notebook and saw Yui staring directly at him.

She already figured out I didn't do my homework? he asked himself, defeated.

Yui then offered him a rectangular box wrapped in a patterned cloth. It looked quite suspicious, but since Yui looked especially imposing on this occasion, he prudently chose to take it off her hands without arguing.

“So what is this exactly?” he asked as he weighed the box in his hands.

“Oh, I wonder,” came Yui’s cheeky reply.

“Let me take a guess... Hmm, some sort of Pandora’s box?”

“It’s just a lunch box, not some sort of cursed contraption!”

“Lunch box?”

“You heard me. Made it just for you,” she said, her joy clearly illuminating her face. Her expression only served to aggravate the doubt rampantly blooming within his heart.

I’ve had a bad feeling about something since I woke up... Could this be it? he thought to himself.

“You always buy yourself some bread from the school cafeteria right, Narito?” Yui asked.

“Well, aren’t we all up to speed.” His reply somehow managed to come across as both flat and sarcastic simultaneously.

“Of course, I see you around all the time,” she declared proudly.

Yuuki supposed that she had her eyes on him long before they became seatmates, but he was sure that was probably because she’d been making fun of him for always eating alone.

“So what do you think? You must be over the moon that a girl made you lunch, huh? Got your heart beating fast yet?”

“Let’s have a quick taste before I judge.”

“Ooh, okay there, master chef,” she giggled. Her laughter caught even the indifferent Yuuki by surprise.

What is she plotting? he wondered before saying, “... Is this a continuation of yesterday’s game or whatever?”

“Oh, I wonder,” she said cheekily, an amused smile glowing on her face.

“Hey, okay. Time out.” Yuuki, on the other hand, wasn’t having it.

“What, why?”

“Because the jig is already up. There’s no point in playing.”

“That’s not true! I’m having loads of fun here. I was looking forward to what kind of reaction you’d have when I suddenly gave you a lunch box, muahaha!” she finished off her sentence with her best impression of a cartoonishly evil laugh.

Yui clearly had no intention of dropping the game. She seemed to view teasing people as a form of entertainment and took a lot of joy in it.

Yesterday, she had tried to deny his assessment of her, but it seemed that for the first time in his life, Yuuki had indeed been spot-on.

"Don't tell me you're about to, pfft, fall in love with me just because we're playing a little friendly game? Haha!" she chuckled.

"Yeah right," Yuuki replied, as flat as ever.

The euphoric expression on Yui's face had begun to lead Yuuki to suspect that she had a twisted side to her personality, which in turn only spurred feelings of pity within him. Regardless of if it was just a game to her or not, she'd already gone through the trouble of whipping up this lunch for him. He simply couldn't bring himself to toss the box back at her.

The lunch box did nothing wrong, he convinced himself before meekly accepting it.

"Haha, I'm so excited for today's lunch break," she said giddily.

"Same here," he replied.

This was Yuuki's strategy for dealing with Mina whenever she was up to no good. He figured that if it worked on his sister, it would work on his classmate, too. Yui, meanwhile, looked quite unsettled ever since he'd finally accepted her gift. She was eerily quiet and kept stealing glimpses at Yuuki when she thought he wasn't looking.

Lunch break came along, and Yui hurriedly left her seat to join up with the group of girls that she usually spent time with. Yuuki, on the other hand, stayed in his seat and dug out the lunch box Yui had given him.

Now that he actually looked at it, he noticed that it was on the larger side. He undid the carefully wrapped packaging and placed the box on his desk. A treasure trove of food awaited him as he lifted the lid. Goodies of all shapes and sizes beckoned him. The first thing to really catch his eye were the sweet fish flakes scrupulously shaped into a cute heart sitting atop a serving of rice.

Now that's a fiery start, Yuuki thought to himself.

He then shifted his attention to the side dishes meticulously placed around the box, specifically a mini hamburger steak and some rolled omelette. Other foods such as braised veggies, boiled spinach, and cuts of meat neatly wrapped around green peppers were carefully placed around the frame of the box. To top it all off, there were some octopus-shaped sausages giving the box the warmth of a genuine homemade meal. It truly was the perfect lunch box, with everything anyone could possibly want stuffed inside.

She really put a lot of effort into making it... Mina would be jumping for joy if she saw it.

He was just about to dig in when he suddenly realized that he didn't have chopsticks. Just as suddenly as the realization came, Yui appeared with a set in hand. She gave him the colorful chopsticks and quickly whizzed back away to the group that she'd been with.

Wonder what that was about, he pondered. It didn't feel particularly pleasant for each of his moves to be so closely monitored, but he soon abandoned such thoughts and focused on the food in front of him instead.

Th-This tastes amazing, he thought, elated to the point of stuttering in his own mind.

He was astounded by the taste of the rolled omelette. The seasoning was just right, and he could taste the perfect hint of the onions mixed within. Each item of food within shared these properties. They were all exquisitely cooked, leaving absolutely no reason to complain. It had been a while since Yuuki had had a lunch box this well-made, and he enjoyed every last bite.

I wish I could make Mina a lunch box half as good as this, he mused to himself. He began to reminisce about a time when his mother used to lovingly pack lunches for him much like this one. Unfortunately, his current lackluster culinary skills barred him from achieving his wish. He could at least take solace in the fact that Mina would be absolutely delighted if he'd make her a lunch box, since at the very least, it would be stuffed with all of her favorite foods.

Yuuki continued enjoying his meal to the fullest when Keitarou came strolling by.

"Ah, you finally brought lunch with you today or what?" he asked with curiosity.

"Something like that."

"Your mom made you one? Man, she gotta love you bits."

"I guess she does," he said offhandedly. As always, Yuuki felt that it would be too bothersome to explain everything in full, so he simply went with the flow of whatever Keitarou said.

The difference between his usual lunch and the food that Yui made was clear as night and day. In fact, he was so satisfied that he cleaned the plate, so to speak. He then sat back for a few minutes and simply appreciated the delicacy he'd just been treated to before finally closing the lunch box and wrapping it back up in the cloth it'd come with. Yui, with her impeccable

timing, had just returned to her seat right as he'd been finishing up. She was fiddling with her phone, only looking up every once in a while to glance at Yuuki and then the lunch box.

"Ah, good timing. There you go. It was tasty. Thank you," he said.

"Huh? Ummm, okay. That's all?"

"What do you mean?" he asked as Yui stared at him expectantly. Yuuki studied her face for a moment until he had an epiphany and reached into his pocket in search of his wallet. "I get it. How much?"

"Wha—? I wasn't asking for money!"

"It's okay; I don't mind. I don't care if we're playing a game or not. That lunch box was totally flawless."

"Oh... well, thank you—hey! I'm telling you I don't want your money!" she protested, snatching the lunch box out of Yuuki's hands. "Ooh? You finished... all of it," she said once she noticed how light it was.

"Yeah. I'm not a picky eater to begin with. Anything is good enough for me really."

"You could've just said you liked it."

"I did. It was really tasty."

"H-Huh?" her jaw dropped, and she completely froze in place.

Yuuki noticed her gradually begin to turn red. She did her utmost to look anywhere but at him, and eventually her frustration enabled her to turn away from his curious stares completely.

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After Yuuki finished his lunch, he found himself with ample time on his hands. He followed Yui's example and decided to check his phone. Yui looked to still be upset at what happened earlier; she hadn't spoken a word to him since. Yuuki turned his phone on, and several notifications immediately popped up onto his screen. All of them were from Mina, which was by no means a surprise since he exclusively used his phone to communicate with his sister in the first place.

"Yukkie, you ate yet?"

"Are you sleeping?"

"YOOHOO"

"Today's lunch was p bad! We had a swarm of small green trees."

She must mean broccoli, he thought before typing up his response to her barrage of messages, “I had a lunch box today. It was pretty delicious.”

“That’s unfair! I want some too!” came Mina’s immediate reply.

“It had spinach and other vegetables in it, as well.”

“K NVM.”

Yuuki thought that she was probably currently goofing off on her phone considering how quick all of her replies were. Although her school prohibited phones on the premises, she insisted that it was something everyone did. Yuuki had believed that she’d learned her lesson after the last time the teachers had confiscated it. She had to beg for it and was on the verge of tears before she finally got it back. It appeared that he’d expected too much from his sister.

“Why did you bring your phone to school? That’s against the rules, you know.”

“I’m in the bathroom, they’ll never find me!”

That only makes me worry more. What is this kid doing in the bathroom alone during lunch break? Yuuki thought to himself. “Have you made any friends yet?”

“Lul.”

“That wasn’t a joke,” he replied, although he’d already deduced the truth from that message alone.

“Where’s YOUR girlfriend, Yukkie?”

“Lul.”

“I’m being serious,” she replied immediately.

So you can brush me off, but I’m not allowed? Well anyway, I hope she understands that you can’t actually get a girlfriend that easily, he thought to himself. “It doesn’t happen overnight. Actually, what are you doing in the bathroom to begin with?”

“Making a plan, of course. Getting friends is gonna be a piece of cake!” she responded in between all of the weird stickers she was spamming at Yuuki. She was rapidly pushing him to his limits, and he was on the verge of simply shutting his phone off altogether.

“What’cha you up to, Narito? Playing some kinda game?” Yui asked, bringing an end to her silence.

“Nope, just chatting,” he explained. Yuuki thought that she’d been upset at him, but this was apparently not the case, as she interacted with him the same way she always did.

“Ooh, I see,” she said unconvinced as she shot inquiring glances at his phone.

“What is it?”

“Nothing, just didn’t think you of all people would be using a messaging app.”

“I don’t.”

“Liar, I just saw you using it.”

Yuuki essentially didn’t message anyone other than Mina, and most of what he did was reply to whatever she sent to him. He didn’t have many people added to begin with; Keitarou was the only exception to all the family and relatives on his contacts list. Even then, Keitarou usually didn’t send him anything because he knew that he wouldn’t be getting a reply anytime soon.

“Fine, I use it occasionally,” Yuuki admitted.

“You sure it’s just occasionally? That person you were talking to was sending you a whole lot of messages,” she commented.

“It’s just my little sister,” he clarified, a bit miffed at her sudden interest in his personal life.

“Ooh, you have a little sister? I see. Very interesting,” she nodded in admiration.

Yuuki found it strange that she was acting like she’d approved of that fact, as if she had just given him the green light to continue messaging his sister.

“What about you, Yukkie? Are you hanging out with some friends rn?” a new message from Mina arrived. Yuuki glanced at it, though he was hesitant to reply right away.

Yui sighed and quietly said, “I wish I could message you too...”

“Huh?”

Yuuki thought he had misheard her at first and gave her a dubious look. Yui quickly realized what had just slipped from between her lips and hurriedly tried to explain herself.

“N-No wait, I didn’t mean it in that way. That was just part of the game we’re playing! You get it, don’t you?” she exclaimed, flustered.

“Huh?” Yuuki grew more confused than ever due to her fishy behaviour. He thought she looked much too distressed for this to actually be the truth.

“A-Ahem, anyways! Let’s add each other, yeah?” she proposed with a very awkward forced smile.

Yuuki wasn't exactly keen on adding a girl who found amusement in teasing people, but the sad state of his contacts list got him to change his mind. He figured it was a good opportunity to strengthen his case if Mina ever questioned his lack of friends again. He was still skeptical, but the offer was simply too enticing to refuse, even if Yui could very well be playing around.

"S-Sike! Just kidding."

"Umm, actually, I wouldn't mind."

"Wha—?"

Yui, who had been acting suspiciously up to that point, was suddenly back to her usual lively self. She was happily tapping away at her phone while Yuuki tried to figure out how to add her to his friends list in the app. After a good while of stumbling through the menus, a new anime avatar with Yui's name showed up on his friends list.

She's using her first name? he thought to himself.

"You only show up under your first name. Is that cool with you?" she asked without looking up from her own phone.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

She seemed to be asking if he expected her to use his full name or not, but Yuuki didn't understand why it mattered in the least. Yet again, he went with the flow and pretended he knew what was going on, letting her know that she could pick whatever made her happy.

"Alrighty then, I'll save you as Yuuki, okay?"

"Sounds good."

"Okay! All set here, Yuuki!" she declared.

Yuuki didn't expect to be called by his name so casually, and it caused him to blink in astonishment while Yui kept teasing him.

"Hm? Something wrong? You said you wouldn't mind if I called you by your first name, riiight?" Yui said, smugly inching closer to Yuuki.

"I guess."

"Sorry, what was that? Are you perhaps embarrassed? Hmm?" she questioned him before bursting out in laughter.

Yuuki realized that he might've made a mistake by asking her to do this out of his own accord. Yui was acting way too cocky, and that smile just wouldn't disappear from her face.

Here we go again. Why would I get embarrassed just from somebody using my first name?

“So it’s also fair game if I called you by your name too, right?” he asked with a straight face.

“Huh?”

“Yui.”

She stopped what she was doing, mouth agape, without even as much as a twitch.

Seeing her bizarre behavior, Yuuki pressed his advantage. “How about ‘Yu-Yu,’ then?”

His efforts were in vain; Yui remained entirely motionless. He waved his hand in front of her face to get her to snap out of it, and sure enough, her mouth snapped shut, and she returned to normal.

“H-Hey! Keep your weird nicknames to yourself!”

“So... Yui it is?”

Yui stopped dead in her tracks once again. Yuuki looked her in the eyes this time and couldn’t help but notice her face gradually turning red once more. She then stood up from her chair without a word and rushed out of the classroom.

Maybe that was a bit too much. Hope I didn’t make her angry, he thought to himself.

She was impossible for him to read as per usual. Yuuki was starting to believe that she was just naturally a moody person, though he still thought she had it coming. She was the one making such a big deal out of calling people by their first name, after all. As he stared at her empty seat, a new notification arrived on his phone. He was relieved to see that it was from Mina.

“Oh yeah BTW, how many friends do you have added now?”

“Two.”

“Gah! You’re really going for it, huh?”

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The rest of the day’s classes went off without a hitch. Yui returned to her seat after the bell rang as though nothing had ever happened. There was a slight shift in her behavior, though. She stayed mostly silent and kept hurling curious glances in Yuuki’s direction every once in a while. Yuuki surmised that her mood swings were as fickle as the weather, so he figured it was best not to burden his mind with every little change.

“Whoa, it’s raining outside.”

The classroom was as rowdy as always after classes were over. Yui walked right up to the window behind Yuuki’s seat and muttered to herself as he examined the weather outside.

“Oh crap, I forgot to bring my umbrella,” she continued. “That gives me an idea... A great idea,” her mutters continued.

Yuuki stood up, ready to head home. Much to his chagrin, he accidentally made eye contact with Yui. He considered ignoring her and going on his merry way, but her gaze wouldn’t allow him to do so.

“... What?”

“Poor wittle Yui forgot her umbwella,” she chirped in her best impression of an adorable cartoon character. She even made a display of tilting her head to the side to add to the effect. Her acting was so terrible that Yuuki felt almost offended that she’d ever thought it would work on him.

The rainy season had begun just the other day, and the weather had been cloudy ever since. It hadn’t rained in the morning, but since the weather forecast predicted heavy rain anyway, Yuuki made sure he didn’t forget his umbrella this time around. He had already grabbed it from the umbrella stand and placed it right near his desk.

“And?” he asked.

“*And* you owe me one. You forget how I let you share mine yesterday?” she said while pointing at him dramatically.

Yuuki didn’t think that counted since they had only shared it for a few minutes before the rain let up, but clearly Yui thought otherwise.

“I was thinking of walking home with you anyways, so it works out well!” she continued.

“Yeah, I’m sure you having no umbrella had nothing to do with it.”

“Whaaa—? Of course nooot,” she replied coyly, but Yuuki saw right through her.

There was no shortage of other options she could’ve taken: borrowing an umbrella from the school, asking one of her friends, or even just waiting it out were all on the table. Thus Yuuki began to consider another possible reason for her to ask him in particular.

“Don’t tell me. Is this also part of your game?”

“Meow.”

“I’m serious here. What even is your endgame?” he asked in astonishment.

“You got it all wrong! I was so busy making the lunch boxes that it just slipped my mind!”

“That doesn’t make it any better.”

“You talk awful big for someone who forgot theirs just yesterday!” she pouted. Yuuki realized that there was no point in arguing and decided to bite the bullet

“Fine,” he conceded after a prolonged exhalation, “we can share mine.”

“Oh, for real? I was kinda half-joking there, but okay.”

“Sure.”

“I see, I see. You couldn’t resist your desire to walk home with me,” she determined, folding her arms and nodding to herself, seemingly convinced that this was truly the case.

Maybe I should ditch her and head home alone after all, Yuuki thought to himself. Having decided, he grabbed his bag and walked past Yui, who was still absorbed in her thoughts. He exited the classroom, made his way through the corridor, and went down the stairs that led to the entrance of the school.

He stopped in front of the shoe rack so he could switch shoes, but the sound of approaching footsteps sent an annoyed chill down his spine. When he looked at the general direction of the sound, he saw Yui with a clear umbrella grasped in her hands.

“Huh, so you do have an umbrella.”

“*Bzzt*, wrong! It’s yours. You forgot to take it with you.”

“Ah...”

Apparently in his hurry to leave Yui behind, Yuuki had actually forgotten his umbrella at the side of his desk. Now that he thought about it, he also forgot his umbrella yesterday because he’d had an argument with Mina in the morning before he left the house.

“I ran all the way to give it back to you, you know. Now you have no choice but to let me use it with you!”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks a bunch and all that,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. He grabbed the umbrella from Yui and accompanied her to the entrance of the building. While Yuuki had ultimately agreed to share his umbrella with her, he was still hesitant to do so in front of all the other students walking home.

Yuuki stopped right under the eaves of the building to double check that it was raining before opening the umbrella and handing it to Yui. He then walked out in front of her, though fortunately for him, the rain had been reduced to a mere drizzle, so it didn't matter if he had an umbrella or not.

"Thank you for letting me use your umbrella. I appreciate it," Yui said cheerfully.

They both walked out the school gates and down the now-wet asphalt. Yui took her time, strolling along like she was having a picnic, but Yuuki tried to pick up the pace and get her to walk faster.

"Raindrops, raindrops, falling from the sky~" she sang. "Hope they all fall on Yuuki to keep me all nice and dry~"

"Could you please not make up weird songs?"

Yui had taken advantage of the lack of people in their immediate surroundings and had begun to sing said bizarre song. However, someone must've been listening to her, as her wish would soon be granted. The wind suddenly picked up. and heavy rain poured from the sky. Yuuki could do nothing but stop and stare at her.

"Hm? Want in?" she asked.

"It *is* my umbrella, after all."

Yui shamelessly laughed and approached Yuuki. She held the umbrella over his head—or she tried to before her dainty arms began trembling in protest.

"Oh no, would you look at that? If only someone tall and strong could hold it up for the both of us, hmm?" she said slyly as she gave him a suggestive gaze. Yuuki knew she was acting helpless on purpose to tease him, but he determined it'd be more of a hassle to get into it with her, so he ended up holding the umbrella up for the both of them.

"I'm not that strong, though."

"Hmmm?"

Yui didn't look to be paying attention to what Yuuki said; she wasn't replying to him at all. Instead, she only stole glances at him from time to time. She had a huge grin on her face, leaving Yuuki to assume the worst. She, meanwhile, had conjured up yet another mischievous idea.

"Alright, I'll hold it up with you," she offered, bringing her hands atop of Yuuki's as she grabbed onto the handle. "Oh no! I grabbed your hand. Whatever will happen now?"

"... Your hands are really wet."

“Wet? I-It’s because of the rain, okay? The rain. Nothing else.”

“Okay, sweaty hands.”

“I just told you it was because of the rain!” she exclaimed, feeling her hands getting warmer around his. The warmth didn’t last long, however, as she pulled them away and began playfully punching his shoulder. “You’re so rude, you know that? I’m gonna mess up your shoulder for that!” she grumbled. Before long, she grew bored and stopped, and deafening silence filled the space around them.

“It got real quiet all of a sudden,” she whispered. The silence left her feeling unsettled, but Yuuki didn't seem to mind it at all. “Umm, are you angry at me?”

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“Huh?” Yuuki was taken aback at how timid she looked, as if something was eating her up inside. It was such a contrast from her usual cheerful demeanor that he couldn’t help but be curious. “I’m not. Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s just that I kind of forced myself into your walk home, and well, how do I put this... It’s so awkward when neither of us is talking, so I want to keep the conversation going, but...” she said as her voice trailed off.

“You don’t have to try so hard,” he reassured her. “And besides, it’s so weird seeing you this meek.”

“I think I might just be a quiet girl deep down,” she said with downcast eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure myself, but sometimes it feels like I’m putting on an act or pretending to be someone that I’m not.”

“Hmm... I wouldn’t worry much about that if I were you,” he said before they both fell silent once more.

Yuuki watched her from the side; she had a gloomy expression on her face, and she looked genuinely dejected. Yuuki wanted to cheer her up, and he found himself switching the umbrella to his left hand and extending his right one toward Yui’s head—though she deftly dodged to the side just before it could reach her.

“Y-You just tried to pat my head again, didn’t you?!”

“Ah, nope, there was just a bug on your head, and—”

“Lies! I will not fall for that again!” she shouted.

I never thought she’d be that bothered by it, he thought to himself. “Sounds good, yeah, I was just trying to lift your spirits,” he explained. Yuuki wondered if he should’ve really tried it after all, as Yui quickly settled down and returned to silence. He glanced at her again, and they both happened to lock eyes, but Yui jerked her quickly-reddening face away.

“You blush pretty easily,” he finally said.

“W-Well excuse me, princess.”

“I just thought it was cute is all,” he said with a slight smile.

“Y-You get your kicks from watching girls get embarrassed? What are you, some sort of sadist?!”

“So now you’re embarrassed?”

“Am not!”

“So you’re just mad at me, then.”

“Yeah, and since you think that’s cute, then that must make you a massive masochist,” she declared as she again turned her face away from Yuuki with a huff. Again, the silence returned.

From what Yuuki gathered, Yui was the type to get nervous during prolonged silences, so he decided to just talk about whatever came to his mind.

“I’m a big fan of the rain,” he said. “Like the sound of raindrops, or the smell of the rainy season. Though I still hate it if it’s raining hard or if there’s a typhoon or something, obviously.”

Yuuki was surprised at himself. He had no idea he could talk about so much, though he still quickly ran out of things to say. The rain was getting stronger, so he took half a step closer to Yui and tilted the umbrella slightly onto her side.

“I think I like the rain too,” she said after a pause.

They maintained their small distance between each other and continued walking down the path. The rain pitter-pattered all around them as they strolled along, and fresh air filled their lungs. They finally reached a crossroads after 10 minutes had passed, and they knew that this was where they had to part ways. They came to a stop, waiting for the red crossing light to switch colors.

“Well, my house is this way, so...” Yuuki said, his voice trailing off.

“Ah, right,” Yui nodded.

“I’ll let you keep the umbrella,” he said, holding it out for her to take.

“Huh? You sure?”

“Yeah, I can just run back home,” he told her as the light turned green.

Yui stood dumbfounded with the umbrella in her hands as Yuuki waved goodbye and walked away. It took her an abnormally long time to come back to reality and wave back. She must’ve panicked, though, because the umbrella almost slipped away from her and nearly went flying, and she flapped her hands around in an attempt to regain her grip on its handle.

A shy girl holding an umbrella and waving at me... Kinda breathtaking, he thought to himself, taking in her nervous smile. *A smile really does suit you best,* he concluded, making his way back home in a hurry, the image of Yui under the rain still fresh in his mind.

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“Welcome home, Yukkie!”

As soon as Yuuki turned the doorknob, he was greeted with an excited Mina barreling toward the entryway. She was wearing an apron for some reason, and the twinkling in her eyes caused Yuuki’s stomach to sink.

“Would you like some dinner? Or would you rather have a bath?”

“I got pretty soaked, so I guess I could go for a bath. It’s kind of too early for dinner, anyway.”

“Wow, you *are* drenched. What happened to you? You forgot your umbrella again?”

Unfortunately for Yuuki, it had started pouring hard soon after he parted with Yui. It was no wonder he needed a bath, considering how his shoes were filled with water and how his shirt was clinging to his body.

“I let someone borrow it.”

“Borrow it? Did someone steal it? Are you getting bullied?”

“No.”

“You gotta be honest with me, Yukkie!”

“I just told you, I let someone borrow it from me.”

Yuuki appreciated that she was genuinely worried for him, but water was dripping from his clothes and mucking up the floor, so he decided it’d be best if he took his shirt off before he inadvertently flooded the place.

“Eek!” she shrieked while she covered her eyes. The spaces between her fingers were conveniently aligned over her eyes, and though she was staring intently, she was clearly just joking around.

“Spare me. Just let me take off my shirt in peace, please.”

Mina pretended to be embarrassed and turned her back to Yuuki before dashing off. The sight now before Yuuki’s eyes was enough to throw him for a loop. When she turned around, he saw her underwear, meaning that she wasn’t wearing anything under her apron. She had the tendency to walk around the house in her underwear because it was “liberating,” especially when Yuuki wasn’t around.

“What are you even wearing? Put on something proper.”

“He says while strips at the door!”

Mina was being a handful, which reinforced Yuuki’s choice to take a bath first and worry about cleaning up the floor later. He took off all of his clothes and entered the surprisingly already-warm bathroom. It appeared that Mina had already prepared the hot water for him before he had come home. Yuuki wanted to wash himself in the shower before he dipped into

the bath, but was interrupted when Mina cracked open the door and peeked in.

"How's the water, Yukkie?"

"It's fine. Listen, what's up with you today?"

"I told you, I'm gonna help you with the housework and stuff!"

"Help with the housework, huh..."

As they spoke, Mina's glances were shifting ever more downwards at increasingly more questionable places until Yuuki finally had enough and shut the door in her face.

For god's sake, he grumbled. He wasn't exactly thrilled about having a little sister who was so interested in her brother's body. And while she might've simply become more conscious of the opposite sex, he would've appreciated it if she were at least a little sneakier about doing it—or better yet, if she never did it in the first place.

When he was done, Yuuki left the bathroom and made his way to the living room where MIna had been waiting for him. She led him by his arm to the table and pulled back a chair for him to sit down in. He settled down and warily examined the large plate before him, which presented him with some bizarre twist on a rice omelette. That dish was just the beginning of his suffering, as next to it there was a bowl of what looked like steaming miso soup.

"You get full points for variety, at least."

"I made it all by myself too! Eat it while it's hot!" she shouted, spreading her arms in excitement. She must've been very eager to cook for him, seeing as it was still a tad early for dinner.

"All by yourself? Wow, that's amazing."

"You bet! Try the omelette! I made it all fluffy," she said, bragging about her apparent newfound culinary skills.

In reality, her omelette was sloppy at best. It didn't even manage to cover the entirety of the rice underneath. Still, Yuuki scooped up a spoonful just for the sake of it. Some of the rice appeared half-cooked, while the rest looked burnt, and the whole thing had a desperate lack of ketchup on top.

"So where's your plate?" he asked.

"I bought a lunch box, so I'm good," she said and pointed at a plastic bag at the side of the table. "Couldn't let hog up the lunch box experience. Oh, by the way, where did you even get yours? Did someone actually make it for you?"

“Pretty much. It was from the person sitting next to me.”

“I don’t think I get it,” she said with a puzzled look. Yuuki couldn’t blame her since he found it just as weird as she did. “Well whatever. Eat up, Yukkie!” she exclaimed.

It did taste somewhat like a typical rice omelette, albeit the rice was a little crunchy, and it was also lacking in seasoning. Yuuki couldn’t possibly complain, though, not when Mina’s eyes were glimmering with excitement.

“It’s pretty tasty,” he said after having considered all the possible variables of the situation.

“Yaaay!” she exclaimed as she jumped for joy.

Her smile was contagious, and soon Yuuki was grinning, as well. However, his calculating mind concluded that leaving things as is would be problematic down the line. Instead of nitpicking the meal she’d made for him, he decided to get her to taste it herself and realize her own shortcomings herself.

“Have you tried it at all? Here, have some,” he said as he brought a spoonful of rice closer to her mouth.

“Nah, I’m good. Gotta finish up my lunch box,” she quickly refused, but Yuuki wasn’t about to let her get off that easily.

“Come on. Open wide.”

“Aaah...” She couldn’t turn her brother down and opened her mouth without so much as a doubt.

“What do you think?”

“It’s alright, I guess,” she said once she’d managed to swallow the mouthful.

“Okay then, how about another bite?”

“Pass.”

Yuuki knew then that she must’ve realized that her cooking skills still had a ways to go, even though she pretended otherwise. Anything else would mean that she suffered from an acute lack of taste buds.

“Wonder what the miso soup tastes like...” he pondered as he took a sip. He was hesitant, but was mildly surprised to learn that, at the very least, the soup had tofu and onions.

This tastes kind of weak, he thought to himself. It was as if she’d only let the miso boil for a little bit. In other words, this miso soup was more of a miso drink. Still, he gave her full points for actually trying and not just defaulting to some store-bought, instant soup variant.

“So what do you think? Can I cook, or *can I cook*?” she said, entirely too proud of herself. Regardless of the resulting taste, Mina had clearly poured a lot of effort into making it, and Yuuki couldn’t possibly make light of that.

I should show her how it’s done next time she cooks.

“Heck, now you made me hungry too. Guess I should eat, myself,” she said as she pulled her lunch box out of the plastic bag.

Yuuki peeked into the box and was able to make out a variety of food such as rice with seaweed on it, some fried chicken, and salmon slices. The amount of boiled food was far too excessive, and there were barely any side dishes to go with the rice. The whole thing looked unappetising at best. The food didn’t look very fresh, and when he took an even closer look, he saw a “30 percent sale” sticker on the box. It was a stark contrast to the lunch box that Yui had prepared for him today.

“Love me some premade grub!” she exclaimed.

The state of the food didn’t seem to bother Mina much, as she was happily heating it up in the microwave. However, remembering how exquisite his lunch box had been compared to the poor state of Mina’s lunch box made Yuuki feel just a little bit guilty.

Something vibrating in his pocket meant his musings would be put on hold for now. It took him a moment to realize that it was his phone. As he pulled it out, he wondered who it could be. Nobody ever messaged him, after all. When he turned on the screen, what flashed across the top was a notification from none other than the newest addition to his friends list: Yui.

“Hope it didn’t rain too hard on you,” it read.

“I’ll live,” he awkwardly navigated to the messaging app and typed up his own reply before putting his phone onto the table and shifting his attention back to his dinner.

“I kinda missed my chance to say thanks. Sorry about that,” Yui replied soon after. Yuuki didn’t know that it was possible to both express gratitude and apologise in one message and briefly considered poking fun at her for it. Ultimately, he chose not to, as he still remembered her strangely reserved behavior earlier in the day.

“You holding up okay yourself?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You looked somewhat gloomy on the way home.”

She'd been responding relatively quickly, but completely stopped after Yuuki's last message. He passed the time watching the news until a vibration finally alerted him to a new message.

"I guess I said something weird back there," Yui replied.

"Not really," Yuuki replied. He was replying a bit faster than he normally would. Maybe it was because he'd improved since Mina had chastised him, telling him that he'd never be competent at any job if he were unable to reply to messages in a timely manner.

"Thank you for telling me not to worry too much about it," she finally replied after yet another brief pause.

"You're awfully honest today."

Once again, he was greeted with radio silence. Mina, meanwhile, had finished up her own meal. Just as Yuuki was beginning to think that Yui was done for the day, his phone buzzed once again.

"That's right. I'm just an honest and helpless girl... JK."

"... Huh?" he said out loud as he stared at his screen in utter confusion.

"Haha, I got you good! That was all part of my game. Did helpless wittle Yui tug on your heartstrings?"

Yuuki struggled to understand what she was even trying to achieve. Whether it was true or not, she wanted him to believe her timid behavior earlier was all part of the joke. While it didn't actually come off that way to Yuuki, he decided he would take her word for it.

Is there really a point to being this roundabout about everything? he thought to himself, lost for words at her shenanigans.

"Wow, seriously? You really had me going there," he finally replied.

"Why does that sound super sarcastic?'

I was completely fooled there, he thought to himself until something on TV drew his attention once more.

"What are you up to, Yukkie?" Mina had arrived and looked inquisitively at his phone.

"Just messaging someone."

"Who exactly?"

"It's a secret."

"Hey, no keeping secrets from your sister!"

"It's just a friend."

Mina was clearly displeased, and while she didn't press Yuuki with any more questions, she did go and retrieve her own phone, as well.

“Okay then, you’re going to have to message me too!” she declared, quickly tapping on her phone with her nimble fingers.

“We’re gonna start with the letter S,” read her message.

“What?” he typed back.

“We’re playing I Spy.”

Yuuki felt strange messaging someone who was sitting right next to him, and it genuinely felt like a huge waste of resources somehow. Besides, he still had to deal with incoming messages from Yui.

“I’ll return the umbrella to you tomorrow. And I was thinking of thanking you in some way,” the message from Yui read. The first thing that came to mind when he saw it was the lunch box she’d made him. He wanted to have Mina try it as well, though he figured it’d be rude if he so bluntly asked for one.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Hm? It’s okay. You don’t have to hold back.”

“Alright then, how about another lunch box?” he replied just as another message from Mina came along, pestering him to reply to her, as well. She looked excited, so Yuuki gave in and went along with her game.

“Soup,” he replied. “OK my turn. I spy something beginning with P.”

“Power Rangers!”

“Uhh, okay. I spy something green.”

“Green ranger!”

“I spy something red.”

“Red ranger!”

“Have you been watching too much TV again?”

“Aaand you lost!”

It was Yuuki’s own fault for questioning her instead of continuing the game, but he couldn’t help but feel that it was unfair. Mina didn’t look like she was done playing either, as she started another game.

“Okay then! Next, we’ll play the word association game. Are you ready? Go!”

“Cashews.”

“Trees!”

“Wait, cashews grow on trees?” he asked aloud while Mina waited patiently for his next reply. Before he could get back to their game, though, yet another text from Yui arrived.

“Is now not a good time? Sorry to bother you if that’s the case,” it read.

Messaging two insistent people at such a fast pace all at once was far too much for poor Yuuki. The fact that Mina was nagging him to reply faster aggravated the matter even further, and the hapless boy ended up confusing the conversations and sent the wrong message to Yui.

"Leaf."

"What?"

"Oh wait, sorry. Never mind that."

Meanwhile...

Yui was laying in bed on her stomach constantly refreshing her messaging app with a huge grin on her face.

"What're you smiling for? Kinda creepy, to be honest."

Yui was so engrossed in her phone that she hadn't even noticed a certain someone entering her room. Her shock was so intense that she fell off the bed and instinctively kicked violently in complete terror. It was like something out of a horror movie.

"Y-You ever heard of knocking?!"

"Maybe next time. But tell me, how did he like the lunch box?"

"He said it was really tasty," she answered with satisfaction.

"I see. And then what happened?" she asked. Her tone indicated that she was slightly disinterested, and she looked generally disappointed by Yui's positive response.

"Uhh, he let me borrow his umbrella, even though he ended up getting soaked."

"He did? While it's raining no less? He doesn't sound all that bright..."

"Hah, you just don't get it," Yui said as she shook her head in disappointment.

"I guess I don't, but what I do know is you already look madly in love," Maki told her, flashing a cheeky smile.

"N-No, that's not the case! I just thought it'd be fun to see his reaction!"

"So basically, you're too embarrassed to make a move on him, so you make it seem like you're only doing it as a joke, hoping that he'll seriously fall in love with you. And then you'll confess?" Maki said all in one big, smug breath.

"O-Of course not!" Yui stuttered hard before finally getting the words out. "What are you even blabbering about? Keep your weird thoughts to yourself!"

“Who even talks like that? Anyways, it sounds like a drag more than anything. Are you actually gonna go with it if he confesses?”

“Huh? Well, I guess I might think about it a tiny bit—if that ever happened—haha, just kidding,” Yui said. She didn’t sound too convincing.

“This is a man’s feelings we’re talking about here,” Maki admonished as she lightly tapped Yui’s head.

“You don’t have to tell me that. He already told me I’m cute,” Yui said as she shook her sister’s hand off and locked eyes with her.

“And you’re over the moon just because of that? God, you’re so easy.”

“Fine! He was also really eager to exchange contact information when I brought it up!”

“Well that’s only normal, since you were the one who mentioned it first.”

“He started calling me by my first name when I used his too. He even came up with a nickname for me.”

“You sure he isn’t just looking down on you?”

“Okay fine. How about this? Look at how quickly he replies to my texts! The lunch box strategy worked wonders. It’s like a direct hit, slowly eating him from the inside out!” she proclaimed, clearly proud of herself.

“I see. Well, I’m glad it worked out for you,” Maki said gently with a smile.

Yui felt that her sister was making fun of her. She was just about to throw Maki out of the room when she remembered something that weighed heavily on her mind and instead decided to ask her for advice.

“Hey, sis, does the word ‘leaf’ have any hidden meaning to it?”

“What?”

“You know, maybe it's some sort of slang boys use or something.”

“Uhh, you’re not making a whole lotta sense right now,” Maki replied, dumbfounded by the absurd question. “Well, nevermind that. Go take a bath already, stinky,” she said off-handedly. She then heaved a sigh and left Yui’s room.

Chapter Five

Returning the Favor

The sun lazily peeked through the clouds on the morning of the next day. It was an overdue change from all of the rain during the past few days. Yuuki arrived at school early and was enjoying said weather from the comfort of his seat. Idling under the sun gave him the boost of serotonin he needed, and it was just enough for him to forget all about the piles of unfinished homework he had accumulated and, most importantly, the existence of a certain annoying someone.

"Hello? Earth to Yuuki! Come in. Are you alive over there?" Keitarou asked as poked his grubby fingers into Yuuki's cheeks.

Sitting next to the window is great. Truly the best, Yuuki thought to himself, absorbed in his own little world of bliss. He finally snapped out of it when he heard the sound of the seat next to him scraping across the floor.

"Mornin'! What'cha looking out the window for?" Yui asked, grinning at Yuuki, who politely returned her greeting as she sat down. "I put your umbrella in its own bag at the umbrella stand. Since the weather's nice today, it felt kinda embarrassing to carry it around."

"Ah, right. Sorry I didn't think about that."

"It's okay. Don't sweat it, I guess..." she said, sounding somewhat dispirited as her voice tapered off.

Yuuki simply hadn't considered the vast array of problems he had created by lending his umbrella to Yui until it was too late.

Ah, well, whatever, he thought as he perked back up again.

Yui, meanwhile, had settled down for the time being. She was rustling around in her bag, clearly searching for something. She eventually pulled out a plastic box and handed it to Yuuki.

"And what's this?" he asked upon realizing that it was lighter than he had initially expected.

"Consider it a little thank you for yesterday," she said ambiguously and smiled back at him.

He was intrigued, so he cautiously lifted the lid. Waiting inside were bundles upon bundles of round-shaped, brown-colored goodies.

"Are these cookies?"

“Handmade ones at that! You like ‘em?” she asked with a joyful tilt of her head.

Their texting session had been interrupted last night, but this was completely unexpected. It was certainly no lunch box, but it just so happened that it’d also been years since Yuuki had gotten the chance to taste some homemade cookies.

“I do. Thanks a lot,” he said. The image of Mina happily enjoying these put a smile on his face.

“Ah, well, y-you’re welcome.”

“Can I give some to my sister?”

Yui was taken aback for a moment, but soon recovered, and her usual soft expression returned.

“You really care a lot about your sister, huh?”

“Do I really? I think this much is normal.”

“Hmm, well, it’s pretty heartwarming either way.”

“You have any siblings yourself?”

Yui was stunned. So either Yuuki was secretly half-Gorgon, or he’d hit a nerve with that question. Once again, Yui had to pull herself out of her stupor, albeit slowly this time.

“I have an older sister. I didn’t think you’d call me by my first name though.”

“Oh, my bad. Just thought it’d be a drag to act all formal now.”

“That’s your reason?”

“Yeah, we’re not strangers anymore. Unless you’re not cool with it, obviously.”

“N-Not at all! It’s all okay with me. I was just thinking about how not big a deal it is just now, actually!”

Yeah, clearly, Yuuki thought to himself, though he decided not to toss any sarcastic fuel onto the flames. “At least you’re not turning red today.”

“Ha! I have a special blessing that makes it so any skill you use on me will only work once! I’m the new and improved Yui Mark II.”

“You some overpowered anime caricature now?”

“What? No! And my face doesn’t turn red. Ever!” she protested while facing away from him. It was true that she wasn’t blushing this time around, but her ears did look somewhat red, surely much to Yui’s dismay.

◆◇

“Whoa! What’s that?! You made me cookies? Thanks a bunch, Yukkie!”

Yuuki and his cookies returned home for the day only to be greeted by Mina, who was lounging around on the sofa wearing only a T-shirt and some panties. She sprung off the sofa once he handed her the cookies, and she started doing a happy jig with the container still in her hand. It looked suspiciously similar to some bizarre tribal dance they had seen in a documentary not too long ago.

“I’m glad you like them, but I didn’t bake them, though.”

“Then who did?”

“My seatmate.”

“You serious? They’re amazing!” she exclaimed, excitedly munching on one. “These are so good! Look! They even have some chocolate stuffed in them! Chocolate!” she continued with enthusiasm, and crumbs flew from her mouth as she shoved the half-eaten cookie at Yuuki’s face.

“I get it, I get it. Just turn down the volume a bit, would you?”

“You should have some more too. Here you go!”

It appeared that Mina had just assumed ownership of the cookies. At least she was generous enough to share some with Yuuki.

“It does have a kick to it,” he said after he tried one himself.

“Right? Right?!”

“Mild and easy on the stomach.”

“An elegant and refined taste.”

“Truly a once-in-a-decade experience.”

“Hmm, yes. An exquisitely abundant flavor.”

They both continued their horrible impressions of food pundits while they finished up the rest of the cookies. Mina scarfed everything down to the very last crumbles. As she patted her belly in satisfaction, she looked like she’d suddenly been struck by an idea.

“That was great!” she exclaimed loudly. “I want to make some too!”

“How about we just don’t? I don’t feel like cleaning up your mess.”

“Don’t be like that. I just want to return the favor. So then your seatmate has to return the favor as well, and then... Muahaha.”

“I knew that was your plan all along.”

“And thus an endless loop of returning favors will be set into motion.”

“I don’t think you fully understand what you’re saying. Besides, this was already her returning the favor. It was to make up for me having to get drenched in the rain the other day.”

“Whaaa...” she frowned in disappointment.

Mina darted out the living room, then quickly returned with a bunch of pens and a pink memo book in hand. She started scribbling on it before tearing the page out once she was finished and handing it to Yuuki.

“*Hello, it’s Mina here. Those cookies were really, REALLY tasty. Simply godly. Magnifique. WOOHOO.”*

The note was written in colorful outlined characters, and the last word was orders of magnitude larger than the rest. Mina had even doodled a small cake along with some doughnuts in the corner of the page. Yuuki could only assume that this was her plan to sneakily give Yui hints for what delicious things to make for them next time.

“That last part wasn’t really necessary, but okay.”

“Be sure to deliver my message by dawn. Inform your seatmate that the tribute was most satisfactory.”

“Uh, what era were you born in?”

“I am forever in your debt.”

The next day came along, and when Yuuki and Yui met during their first class together, Yuuki showed her Mina’s memo. Judging by the huge smile on her face, Yui seemed to appreciate the gesture. She eventually took the note and carefully filed it away inside one of her clear folders.

“Did you have some too, Yuuki?”

“I did, and they were delicious. I gotta say, you can really hold your own when it comes to cooking.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’ve been forced to—I mean, I’ve been at it since I was a kid,” she said, puffing her chest with pride.

“Good for you, honestly.”

Seeing just how impressed Yuuki was, Yui seemed to think of yet another bright idea.

“Oh? Do you have a soft spot for homemakers, perhaps?”

“Always been jealous of people who could cook properly since I’m really bad at it and everything. And I respect them.”

“O-Oh, so you do.”

“Yeah,” he nodded slightly.

Yui didn’t seem to notice, as she looked to be deep in thought all of a sudden, her eyes facing downwards with her hand covering her mouth.

“What’s wrong?” asked Yuuki.

“Hm? Oh no, it’s nothing! J-Just a yawn!”

She must not have slept well, Yuuki thought to himself.

However, Yui's hand would remain in place for a while longer..

◆◇

The third period rolled by, but their teacher was still nowhere to be seen. Just as the class was beginning to get into a rowdy discussion on the 15 minute law, the teacher from the next door classroom poked their head in to explain the situation. Apparently, their third period teacher had an emergency to tend to or something, so they were now expected to quietly sit in class and study by themselves during what was now effectively a free period. Some students dug out their phones, some began reading manga, others moved seats and began chatting with their friends, and everyone in general was just having a good time.

Although as per usual, Yuuki was laying down at his desk, off in his own little world. He was struggling to stay awake, and the relaxing music playing through his fancy noise-cancelling headphones that he'd bought with the money he'd saved certainly wasn't helping him stay upright. He was just about to cross over the boundary into dreamland when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"What are you listening to over there?"

Yuuki sluggishly turned his head to the side and, as he'd expected, he was met with the curious gaze of Yui. She was leaning in pretty close, and he briefly wondered why her seat was closer to him than usual before shrugging it off.

"Some Mozart," he answered.

"Whoa, you're a fan of classical music? D'you play any instruments? Or do you have a family full of musical prodigies or something?"

"Not really. My family listens to him a lot, so I thought I'd give it a try myself. You know, to see what's so amazing about it."

"I'm starting to see a pattern. Do you have something against popular things?"

Yuuki could just have been the type that liked to see everything for themselves. He could also simply have too much time on his hands. Both possibilities were equally valid.

"And? What do you think about his music now?"

"Dunno. It's great for falling asleep, though."

“Seriously?”

Yuuki closed his eyes once again to try to return to his nap, but he was interrupted once again.

“Ta-da!” shouted Yui. “Come on, check this out!” she insisted.

Yuuki considered trying to ignore her, but she didn’t look like she was going to budge anytime soon. He reluctantly gave up on his plan to catch some sleep and sat upright. Yui ruffled through the pages of what looked to be a notebook, though it was too quick for him to be able to make out what was written.

“And this is?”

“Oh, it's only the collection of the funniest quotes from a bunch of different improv shows! Thought I’d make you laugh with a few I’ve got written down here.”

“Huh?” he involuntarily exhaled in disbelief. Yui, however, didn’t seem to notice. She continued to rifle through her notebook until she found a joke she liked.

“How ‘bout this one: a surprisingly strong gust of wind blew away the principal’s wig. What do you think was hidden under that wig?” she read it aloud, then took a peak at Yuuki’s face. He didn’t look like he was going to actually guess, so she went ahead with the punchline, “A receding hairline!” she said excitedly, once again looking at Yuuki’s face and waiting for him to crack a smile.

I suppose it’s from an improv show where you ask the question and deliver the punchline yourself, Yuuki thought before continuing, “Was that supposed to be funny?”

“That one was just to test the waters, obviously! A little jab to try and get the crowd on board. It’s pretty important to warm them up with something common so they can relate.”

“Good plan. Bad execution, however.”

“Only *then* you can tell a story that sounds somewhat believable, iterate on it midway through, and add some spice to set up a completely made-up situation for the sake of laughs. But I knew it would fall flat if I started with that technique right outta the gate.”

The informative, yet unsolicited lecture on comedy theory by Yui made Yuuki wonder if there truly was any basis to it. Clearly, though, that was a question for another time.

“Okay, okay next one... Pfffftttttt!”

“You already failed by laughing at the joke.”

“Just read it, please. You be the host and read the question, pffff...”

Yuuki sighed before reading, “A surprisingly strong gust of wind blew away the principal’s wig. What do you think was hidden under that wig?”

“S-Seasoned seaweed. Bwahaha! I’m dying over here!” she wheezed, struggling to hold in her laughter. Yuuki, on the other hand, was as unamused as ever.

“I literally do not get what’s so funny about this.”

“Use that noggin! He put some seaweed on there as a backup plan to prevent his shiny dome blinding everyone around him, *and* it’s *seasoned*, no less! You can cook up some rice to go with it in an emergency! Hilarious!”

“Ha...”

“Are you not entertained?”

Yuuki did finally understand, now that she’d gone to the trouble of explaining the whole thing to him. The thing is it wasn’t nearly enough to tickle his funny bone.

Maybe Yui’s sense of humor is too forgiving, he thought to himself. It was the only conclusion he could come to after he saw how hard she laughed at a joke such as this.

“Well then, it’s your turn next. You come up with something funny.”

“Do I have to?”

“A surprisingly strong gust of wind blew away the principal’s wig. What do you think was hidden under that wig?” she read the question once again, eyes glimmering with misplaced expectations.

God, really? Yuuki said to himself—he was stumped for a while and gave the punchline some serious thought. Luckily for him, he was able to come up with something, eventually.

“The murder weapon.”

“Hey! Why did it have to take such a dark turn!” she heaved a sigh and slumped her shoulders, her expectations betrayed.

After I tried so hard to think of something, this is how I get treated? Yuuki silently objected.

“I’m not a fan of dark humor,” Yui said.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter what you are and aren’t a fan of in this case, right?”

“Whatever, onto the next one!”

“Just tell the joke. No need to set it up every time,” he told her. He did have a point. Reading the question each time took the joy out of it, not to mention how time-consuming it was. It didn’t appear that Yui agreed with him, but her grin had returned when she began leafing through her notebook once more.

“A sproingy spring.”

“You think it’ll be less springy in the afternoon because of the heat?”

“A trap card.”

“You could say the gust’d *activated* it.”

“The lamb sauce.”

“It’s *raw*!”

“A resignation letter.”

“Good, a quick way to save face and quit now that everyone knows about the wig.”

“The meaning of life.”

“Scraping the bottom of the barrel, are we?”

“A murder weapon.”

“Hey, you can’t just steal my joke like that.”

“Sir John Franklin’s lost expedition.”

“I’m over this. Let’s stop,” he said. He knew that she’d reached the end of whatever episode she’d plagiarized now that she was using his own joke. Yui didn’t seem particularly bothered though and looked quite happy with herself.

“So we got a weapon responsible for the doomed disappearance of a ship on one hand, and a wig on the other. I guess we got our answer.”

“That isn’t how comedy is supposed to work, and what do you even mean by that?”

“Wasn’t that funny?”

“Hmm,” Yuuki folded his arms and thought about it, inadvertently striking feelings of anxiety into cheerful Yui’s heart.

“You know, I just wanted you to laugh. That’s all,” she confessed dejectedly.

“I know you mean well, but what do you get out of that?”

“It’s not that I personally get anything, but you’re just so cute when you smile,” she said with a wink. Her smile was as perfect as a model’s, especially with how her mouth quirked up at the corners, mesmerizing anyone who looked at it.

“I could say the same exact thing about you.”

“Wha—?” Yui froze, her jaw nearly dropping to the floor. She then clapped her hands to her cheeks and pressed them against her face as hard as she could.

“What are you doing, exactly?”

“Oh, this? Just an impression of the kid from the *Home With My Lonesome* movie! Oh! And that one famous painting too. Haha!”

“You... Huh?”

“Your attack won’t work on me! It will not!”

“Again with the anime talk?”

Yui held that peculiar pose for some time while she forcefully exhaled all of the air in her lungs. She then put her hands down and made an almost-hilarious solemn face as she looked at Yuuki.

“I’d say wittle Yui looks cute without even needing to smile,” she said with an incongruently sharp look.

“I see. You’re pretty kind.”

“I-I’m sorry?”

“You went through all that trouble just to entertain me,” he said. That was the trigger needed for that grave expression of hers to crumble to pieces, leaving her looking downwards and her face gradually turning red.

“N-No, it’s nothing like that. It’s just that, well, I thought it’d be nice to make you smile.”

“Uh-huh. Your jokes weren’t the least bit funny, by the way.”

“You tryna start something?!” Yui yelled. She then shot up out of her seat, grabbed onto his desk, and got ready to shake it around. Her tantrum was cut short, however, as the class representative snapped at her, telling her to quiet down since neighboring classes still had lectures in session.

Chapter Six

Seatmate Killer Victims Alliance

It was a lunch break on a day like any other. Yui had left her seat as per usual to hang out with her pals. Keitarou took this opportunity to ask Yuuki to join him for some lunch at the cafeteria. Yuuki wasn't exactly thrilled at the idea, as the cafeteria tended to be crowded most of the time. And sure enough, today was no exception. Seeing the state of the place, the two of them settled on only buying drinks and some bread so that they could comfortably eat in the classroom instead. First, though, Keitarou excused himself to go to the bathroom. Yuuki considered continuing on ahead, but someone suddenly blocked his way.

"Hey. Narito, was it? Could you spare a moment of your time?"

He was a tall, slender guy who wore black frame glasses and had his silky hair brushed to the side. While his body was slim, his face had a rounded shape which was further accentuated by his large, round eyes and big lips. He wasn't hideous by any means, but some parts of his face were prominent, to say the least.

"Can I help you?" asked Yuuki.

"No need to be so uptight. I consider us comrades, Narito."

"Huh? I don't even know who you are."

"Oh, you don't? I'm Kento Sonoda, the student who just so happened to score top marks in our class by complete accident? I thought I was quite famous."

He wasn't exactly fun to talk to either. In fact, the guy felt comfortable enough to start patting Yuuki's shoulders in an attempt to keep him engaged in the conversation that Yuuki had obviously lost interest in.

"I know what you're going through. You don't have to say a word," he continued.

"What are you talking about?"

"Hmm, maybe I should put it this way: I was the last person to sit next to Yui Takatsuki," he said with a stern look in his eyes.

"I see. And?" Yuuki replied, still not exactly following what Kento was trying to get at.

"Come now. You're seriously telling me you didn't already know? We're in the same class, Narito. It would be nice if you showed some

concern for me," he said, the dissatisfaction clear in his eyes.

Why do all the weirdos gravitate toward me? Yuuki thought to himself as he averted his eyes.

"AAARGH!"

A battle cry echoed throughout the hallway. Keitarou was charging at Kento and pulled off a picture-perfect drop kick when he was in range. However, Kento had good reflexes and was able to dodge somehow by bending himself backwards like some sort of action hero.

"H-Hey! What was that all about?!" he protested, his eyes bulging in surprise.

"That was the Keitarou Kick Special. Why are you buggin' my broski? Hmm?" Keitarou asked as he wrapped his arm around Yuuki's shoulders from behind and patted his arm. The public display of bromance was extremely short-lived, however, since Yuuki wriggled out of Keitarou's grasp as soon as he was able to. "So who's this clown?" Keitrou continued, flicking his thumb in Kento's direction.

"Dunno. Says he was the guy sitting next to Yui before me or something."

"Hmm, oh! Why didn't you say so, man? Aren't you the guy..." Keitarou's sentence trailed off, and he suddenly narrowed his eyes, his stare piercing Kento's very soul before he finally continued in almost a whisper, "... who confessed to her?"

Kento nodded slowly. Keitarou suddenly grabbed his hand and shook it vigorously.

"Comrade!"

"C-Comrade? Wait, does this mean you also...?" Kento didn't seem to have it in him to finish his question.

"You know it. I'm one of the OGs who fell victim to the Seatmate Killer way back in middle school. Technically that makes me your senior!" he explained excitedly.

Whatever ethereal connection the Seatmate Killer rejects seemed to share with each other, it was clear that Yuuki could not relate at all.

"Gosh, Yuuki, don't look so disgusted, man. She literally gave us all the signs!" Keitarou insisted.

"If you say so," came Yuuki's dry reply.

"In one ear and out the other. Meh, whatever. Listen up, though. I gotta come clean: I was the one who came up with the nickname!" he declared,

elated at the announcement as if it was actually something to be proud of.

"You can consider me your senior as well in that regard, Narito. I want to protect my juniors, which is why I came to warn you—" Kento interjected, but was himself interrupted by Keitarou.

"Damn, I had no idea. Sorry for what I did earlier, man. But hear me out, this is a great time to start something amazing. Let's celebrate the founding of the Seatmate Killer Victims Alliance!" proclaimed Keitarou as he grabbed both other guys' hands and forcibly pulled them all together.

"I don't want any part of your losers' club," said Yuuki.

"Don't be that way. You're basically one of us already. You should go confess, get rejected, and get it over with already. It'll give you peace of mind guaranteed!" Keitarou said with confidence. His speech must've boosted Kento's confidence as well, because he rode the wave and went on a tangent himself.

"He's right, you know. Any hope she gives you is merely false and will only serve to hurt you that much more. What man could resist her beautiful smile when she praises his intelligence, not to mention when she tells him that she feels lucky that he's the one who happens to sit next to her and can help her in class!"

"You got played like a fiddle."

"I don't regret putting all that time into studying for her! Not one bit!"

"Good for you," Yuuki replied flatly. He figured it'd simply be too cruel to disrupt whatever memories Kento was reliving.

Keitarou, however, had no such reservations. He patiently listened to his little speech before bursting out in laughter.

"That's all it took for you to fall for her? Pathetic."

"I-Is that so? And how did she deceive you, then?"

"Let's see here; she'd always greet me with a big smile and all that stuff, but well, I think the killing move was the eraser incident."

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MOMO

“The eraser incident?”

“Yeah. I accidently dropped mine on the floor one day, and it rolled over to her. She picked it up, blew the dirt off it, then returned it to me. She had the most beautiful smile on her face, and I was like *bam*!” he emphasized it by punching his own open palm, “Dead on the spot! You get where I’m coming from, right Yuuki?”

“My God, you’re a lost cause.”

“I was convinced the stage was all set for me to confess to her after that, bro. Everything was perfect, y’know? And by the way, this was only after 10 days of sitting next to her.”

“Just 10? You work fast.”

“I went up to her and told her straight up how I felt. You know what she said to me? She went ‘Huh? O-Oh, no, I’m sorry. I-I’m not looking for anyone right now. Sorry again,’” Keitarou’s imitation of Yui was comically off the mark. “She was flustered as all hell! My guy, it made me feel so bad for making her feel that way that I just wanted to die right there on the spot!” he hid his face in embarrassment, then let out a strange, loud howl.

“Hmm,” began Kento, scratching his chin. “That’s quite different from how it went when I did it. She laughed it off and told me that she doesn’t see me that way. She said it was really awkward and that we should pretend it never happened. Honestly, she seemed pretty used to dealing with that sort of thing.”

“You straight up had no chance.”

“Y-You’re mistaken! It’s just that my timing was off! At any rate, I have been theorizing about her peculiar behavior. What I mean is, why would she act so friendly only to ultimately turn you down? I used my full brain power and achieved a hypothesis so perfect that your inferior brains could never come close to comprehending without my help.”

“Alright Einstein, spill the beans. Let’s hear it.”

“My hypothesis is,” he paused for dramatic effect, “that she’s playing a game where the goal is to make her seatmate fall in love with her!” he said with so much vigor that everyone present all but heard some game show-esque “big reveal” sound effect go off in the background. Keitarou appeared shocked by the revelation, but Yuuki, on the other hand, was grinning ear-to-ear.

“What’s up with you, Yuuki? You smile once every blue moon, and this ain’t exactly the time for it, bud,” said Keitarou.

“It’s just that I already figured that out.”

“Oh! So you agree with me, Narito? This has to be the answer, right?!”

“Yeah, I even called her out on it. Not that she admitted it, but still.”

“For real? We got a badass over here!” Keitarou poked Yuuki teasingly. “But yeah, I guess that makes all the pieces fall into place. So she’s basically just toying with us, huh? Good thing your brain doesn’t stink as much as your breath, Sonoda... Wait. What kind of twisted villain is she to play with our hearts like that?!”

“Nah, I don’t think she’s evil,” said Yuuki. “She let me copy her homework the other day.”

“That's all it takes for you to side with the enemy? Turncoat.”

“No, I agree with what Narito is saying here! I’m sure she must be a good girl deep down, hence there must be a reason that she acts the way she does,” Kento again scratched his chin as if he were stroking a non-existent beard in thought. “I’ve got it! She must have experienced some sort of trauma in her childhood—or perhaps she’s currently suffering through something traumatic! Hah, poor thing,” his voice was full of mock concern.

Mhmm, I can definitely see why this guy is at the top of the class.

“Let it be known, however, that I would never criticize my beloved—er, I mean, Yui! And you want to know why?” Kento asked, holding his palm up in front of them. His eyes then suddenly opened wide, and he raised his arms and yelled, “I have not the slightest fraction of regret about being played with! Thank you for that brief moment of bliss! Thank you for bestowing unto me dreams, hope, and joy!”

“What’ve ya lost your marbles or something?” Keitarou asked before quickly changing his tune himself. “No, you know what? I agree with you! I was over the moon too! Every single day felt like an adventure!”

Yuuki figured he’d take advantage of their distraction to pretend he didn’t know them and sneak away. He knew his plan had failed when he felt one of them grab him by the shoulder.

“Though you’re getting toyed with, relish these moments for as long as you can!”

“Yeah, listen to the guy! Enjoy every last drop!”

I doubt there’s anything more annoying than having both these guys tag-team me like this. I just wanna go eat lunch already, Yuuki thought to himself.

In the meantime, three of his classmates turned the corner and began walking in the boys' direction. Yuuki glanced their way as he was being shaken and happened to make eye contact with Yui, who was in the middle of her group.

"Ah, look who it is," she started.

The guys swiftly released Yuuki as soon as her melodic voice reached their ears. Keitarou snapped his phone to his ear and looked away, pretending to be in the middle of a very important call. Kento, meanwhile, spun around and busied himself with the daunting task of cleaning his glasses with a cloth.

"Take that! And that!" Yui grunted as she approached, throwing jabs at the air while she passed them.

"What are you doing, Yui?" one of the girls walking next to her asked.

"Nothing. Just putting fear into the heart of my rival!"

"Your *what*? That's a riot!"

The girls tittered among themselves as they continued down the hallway before suddenly stopping and turning to look back at the guys.

"Who're you?" one of them asked.

"We're in the same class!" insisted Kento.

"Uh-huh. I think I maybe kinda remember you being around."

Yuuki listened in on the conversation, though he didn't pay much attention to it as he was prone to do. Kento's confident smile and wave were completely and utterly ignored by the girls; however, it didn't seem to faze him much. Still, it made Yuuki feel a bit sorry for him.

"Something the matter?" Kento asked.

"Nah, don't worry about it," Yuuki answered. He couldn't bring himself to ask if he was okay after being brushed off like that. Kento must've caught on, as his cheeks twitched slightly, and he then folded his arms, delving deep into thought yet again.

"Narito, it seems that Yui is fixated on taking you down. The Seatmate Killer doesn't rest until she ensures the demise of her prey. It's hit or miss, and she's never missed."

"Nah, doubt she'll be able to keep it up now that her master plan's been revealed."

"How naive. So be it. I'll let you in on a little secret. I achieved the highest grades in class, so obviously I had my doubts about her from the very start. However, thanks to the relentless barrage of hints that she was

hurling my way, I honestly thought that I might have had a chance with her. Of course, that only sealed my fate in the end."

"Relentless? It didn't particularly sound like she was leading you on or whatever, from what you've been saying."

"Ha. Well, that's all the wisdom I have for you. Do your best, Narito," Kento said and gave Yuuki a solemn peace sign.

How disturbing.

When the classes for the day had finally ended, Yuuki let out a satisfying yawn and began putting away his stationery. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, his eraser fell off his desk.

"Ah."

It bounced off the floor and rolled, as if compelled by fate itself, toward Yui. She noticed it immediately and bent down to pick it up.

I wonder if she's gonna do the thing. Yuuki wanted to see Yui's fabled, eraser-based killing blow for himself. He was curious about how effective it really was when not being embellished by his friend's nonsense.

"Whoa, free eraser. You're mine," she said, already midway through stuffing the eraser into her pencil case.

"Hey."

"Can I help you?" Yui played dumb, rolling the eraser around in her hand. "Oh, did you drop this slightly-used eraser, or...?"

"Spare me. Just give it back." Yuuki said, cutting her fun short.

"Aww, why do you gotta be such a party pooper?" she pouted.

"Thank you so much for picking it up for me. There, see? I'm totally grateful. Now can I have it back?"

"I really wanted to have something that belongs to you though," she said, cutely dragging out the last word with a smirk.

Yuuki felt shivers shoot up his spine upon realizing that Yui may try to nab any of his things at the first possible opportunity.

"I never expected the Seatmate Killer to be a Thief class..."

"You're completely missing the point. You're no fun, you know."

"I just want my eraser back."

"Alright then, let's make a deal," she proposed as she took her own eraser out from her pencil case and put it on top of the desk, grinning all the while. The eraser was significantly smaller than Yuuki's. It was daylight robbery, pure and simple.

"This one is completely worn out."

“Don’t be such a cheapskate. You’ll ruin the negotiations.”

“You’re not gonna dupe me. Mine’s basically brand new, and I don’t want your trash.”

“Well, this one has been used by a cute high school girl, so it’s got a huge resale value despite its size.”

“I see. Okay, throw in a photo of yourself, and you’ve got yourself a deal. Gonna make me some cash.”

“Hold up, I was just kidding,” she said, looking displeased. She gave in and returned Yuuki’s eraser.

Hmm, maybe Sonoda was right after all, Yuuki thought. He was becoming convinced that Yui must’ve been suffering from some kind of mental issue that was influencing her behavior. *Guess he truly has earned the top spot in class.*

With that unsavory realization, Yuuki felt it would be too cruel to continue acting so mean to her. Fortunately for Yui, however, Yuuki had ample experience dealing with this type of girl—namely with his younger sister Mina.

I’ve gotta cheer her up somehow. He contemplated how he’d treat Mina in a similar situation and concluded that it would be best to just hear Yui out.

“Hey, umm, if something is bothering you or anything, you can always talk to me. I’m here to listen,” he said gently

At first, Yui appeared puzzled, but then she eagerly raised her arm up in the air.

“I’ve got one then! I’ve got one!” she announced eagerly.

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“My seatmate is looking down on me and acting all weird.”

“Hmm. Then what should I say instead?”

“Uhhh...” Yui looked upwards, mulling over it. Yuuki wondered what she was thinking about as a smirk flashed across her face before she hurriedly returned to her previous serious expression. “Y-You should figure that out yourself!”

“Myself?”

It was Yuuki’s turn to gaze upwards next. He felt her glancing at him from the side, but he was too busy trying to remember how he’d proceeded with a similar situation involving Mina in the past.

“I know you’re overwhelmed, but... I want you to feel at ease.”

“What?”

“It’s going to be alright. I’m sure of it.”

“Again, what are you rambling on about?” she frowned, clearly becoming more suspicious of Yuuki.

Yuuki was growing increasingly worried about her mental health, though he still did not want yet more innocent people falling victim to her. He gave her a reassuring smile, but Yui, for some reason, got flustered and turned away, doing her best to look anywhere but at him. It wasn’t long before she looked to have settled down, but as soon as her eyes once again landed on Yuuki, she sprang out of her seat.

“I-I’m leaving!”

“Are you sure you can find your way home all by yourself?“

“O-Of course I can! What do you take me for, a child?!”

“Take care. Don’t go taking any detours on your way back now, okay?” he said, sounding like a particularly concerned geriatric.

“T-That’s none of your business! You’re not my mother! And you’re not my granny either!” Yui protested, her face beginning to glow a brighter and brighter red. She snatched up her things and ran out of the room.

Something is definitely off about her, Yuuki speculated. *Obviously Yui and Mina are completely different people, and it goes without saying they’d react differently to what I do. Guess I need to think up a new strategy to handle Yui.*

Yuuki stood there with a pensive expression plastered on, stranded all alone in the middle of the classroom with nothing to keep him company but his musings.

Chapter Seven

Completely Serious

The sky today was riddled with clouds speeding along off to wherever clouds go. The occasional spills of sun were quickly snuffed out before shining down from somewhere else. Much to everyone's chagrin, the forecast had predicted a typhoon that had a chance of arriving by the end of the week.

Yuuki spent his lunch break, as well as any other time he found himself bored out of his mind, looking out the window by his seat. The different formations of clouds kept him entertained for a while, but eventually he grew bored of that, as well.

"Did you hear what she said? She..."

"Whaaa—? She actually said that?"

The girls sitting near Yuuki scooted their seats closer together and continued to engage in their covert gossip. As opposed to Yuuki, Yui was quite popular in class, so it wasn't out of the ordinary for the girls to gather around her seat and make some noise. However, Yui was usually the one to approach them, not the other way around.

Yuuki, on the other hand, barely spoke to three people. Other than Yui, Keitarou and Kento would come up and pester him if they found him alone in the hallways, though as a rule, they made themselves scarce if Yui was around.

Yuuki finished up his lunch and sat back in his seat. He'd wanted to spend the rest of his time reading a book, but the endless chatter from the seat next to him wasn't allowing him to do so. As he went through his other options in his head, such as playing a game on his phone, he suddenly began to feel very drowsy and abandoned those ideas altogether.

"Wow, I guess that's just the way it is."

"Kinda crazy."

The girls next to him weren't talking about anything remotely interesting to Yuuki, so he simply laid his head down on his desk and rested his eyes. He recalled one time in the not-so-distant past where he'd accidentally dozed off and woke up in a complete panic in a totally empty classroom.

“Really, though, you’re way too buddy-buddy with your seatmates, Yui,” said one of the girls. Her voice was loud, and she spoke clearly enough that Yuuki was able to pick up on every word she said. Normally he’d try to mind his own business, but he had little choice but to eavesdrop this time around as he’d forgotten his precious MP3 player at home.

“I dunno. I just think it’s nice to be on good terms with them,” Yui responded.

“Speaking of, you know who’s sitting next to me now? It’s that Sonoda guy. I dunno how you were able to stomach him. He’s a pain in the ass!”

“Really? He’s pretty smart, though. You could ask him just about anything, and he’ll explain it to you.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’d rather not talk to him at all if I can. It gets pretty exhausting.”

Yuuki’s ears perked up at the mention of one of his acquaintances.

“He goes on and on about his grades or whatever, but, like, did you see what he got in the last midterms? Dude, he placed fifth! Then he still has the nerve to be all stuck-up like that? He sucks.”

“I know right!? I heard him muttering under his breath when he saw the results!” shouted another girl, and the whole group burst out laughing at Kento’s expense.

Guess the guy is popular after all... for all the wrong reasons, Yuuki thought to himself. He then noticed a lull in the girls’ conversation before they started up again, only quieter this time.

“Hey, you think he’s asleep?”

“Maybe, I dunno.”

“No clue. I’ve never even spoken to him.”

“Well damn. He looks like the quiet type.”

“I see him with Hayami a lot, but I have no idea how they manage to get along.”

“Yeah, that guy looks like he’s got a ton of friends, but he really doesn’t. He’s actually super laid back when he’s by himself.”

“For real? News to me, haha!”

The girls continued whispering and snickering among themselves until Yui chose to clear the air a bit.

“It’s less like he’s quiet and more like he’s absent-minded or something. Like he’s sleepy or daydreaming or something,” she said.

“Huh. Are you sure he’s right in the head?”

“Well, he’s definitely a little on the weirder side for sure,” replied Yui.

“Hmm, you sound like you know all about him,” one of the girls said teasingly.

“Wh-What? I just described the way he normally acts!”

“So you pay that much attention to him? Phew, is it getting hot in here or what?”

“L-Leave me alone!”

Their whispering soon erupted into audible giggles. Despite the cacophony happening right next to him, Yuuki was still barely staying awake. Soon enough, his hearing shut off entirely, and he drifted off into a deep sleep.

Yuuki woke with a start and was greeted by an empty room deprived of all of the bustle and liveliness that was present during lunch break.

God, I did it again. Right, right, fifth period was in the science lab, Yuuki thought to himself. He slowly noticed someone staring right at him from the side.

“Hey, you’re finally awake,” Yui said with a smile. She was resting her elbow on her desk and propping up her chin with her hand. “C’mon, we’re gonna be late. Let’s go.”

Yuuki stared up at Yui, bleary eyed and still half-asleep. He was completely mesmerized by her. She noticed his strange gaze and leaned in closer to him with a cute giggle.

“What’s up with that face? Are you surprised that I waited for you?”

“Huh. So you did.”

“You bet. What’s wrong, Yuuki?” she asked teasingly. “Your heart skip a beat?”

“Thank you,” he said with a relieved sigh. It was reassuring having someone around in the otherwise eerily quiet classroom.

Yui didn’t expect a genuine expression of gratitude from Yuuki, and her once-confident demeanor cracked as she stumbled on her words,

“I... I, uhh,”

“Uhh?”

“Uwahahaha! You had the most peaceful expression when you were conked out!”

“How could you tell? I was lying face down,” his question caught Yui off-guard for a second time, and she averted her eyes.

“Well too bad! Actually, I just came to grab my pencil case that I’d accidentally left behind.” She dangled the case from her hand for emphasis.

“Good enough for me. Don’t want to experience that unpleasant solitude again.”

“Solitude?”

Guess she’s never had this kind of experience before. I think it’d be more surprising if she did, though, Yuuki mused to himself.

“Look at that,” Yui said as she stood up and gestured to the classroom around them, “We've got the whole place all to ourselves.”

“So?”

“Hmm, well y’know, we could do all sorts of things,” she said as she crouched down by Yuuki’s desk and stared him straight in the eyes, “like stare at each other like this.”

Yuuki could now get a good look at all of her well-proportioned features. Her dainty nose was adorable, but what really grabbed all of his attention was that beautifully rounded pair of eyes.

“I’ve been thinking about this for a while now, but I think you look a lot like my sister.”

“Wha—” Yui exclaimed. As was becoming routine for her, she was caught off-guard by Yuuki’s remark. She bounced back with a forced smile and stuttered, “R-Really now? What does your sister look like? Is she cute?”

“Yeah,” he answered without hesitation.

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

“S-Sorry, I just wasn’t expecting such an immediate reply. And a confident one at that”

“What do you mean?”

“Wouldn’t you try to deny that sort of thing?

“There’s no reason to.”

“Hmmm,” she nodded to herself, apparently lost in thought. Her expression softened, and she looked like an idea had just popped into her head. “Wait, so if you think your sister’s cute, and I look like your sister, then...”

“Then what?” he asked dumbly, but received no reply. “I feel like you two kinda have the same personality, too.”

“H-Huh? What’s that even mean? Oh, yeah, what month were you born in by the way?”

“Me? December.”

“I was born in August! You know what that means? You’re a whole four months younger than me, so you can call me your big sis if you want!” she exclaimed as she stood up straight, put her hands on her hips, and puffed out her chest with pride. Yuuki did not join in on the sudden festivities, seeing as he failed to see why any of that mattered.

“Then act your age.”

“Sorry, what was that? You want your big sister to comfort you? Maybe give you some pats and tell you that you’re a good boy?”

Yuuki tried, and failed, to hold in his laughter.

“Don’t laugh!” she demanded. At that moment, the bell rang, signaling the start of the next class. Yui snapped around to look at the clock and exclaimed, “See what you did?! We’re gonna be late now because of you!”

“How is that my fault?”

“Whatever! Just get a move on already, gosh!”

Yuuki sluggishly grabbed the necessary textbooks and rose from his seat. Yui, meanwhile, was doing her best to make him hurry on up. Before long, the pair trotted out of the classroom.

◆◇

The day’s classes finally came to an end, and Yuuki was more than ready to head home. He was just about to leave when he was stopped by Yui, who still had her notebooks and such spread out on her desk.

“You’re already headed home?”

“Yeah. Goodbye,” he said to her and turned around to go on his merry way. Yui, however, extended her hand and stopped him once again.

“Wait.”

“Hm?”

“Just a moment,” she told him. Yuuki stood there, completely oblivious as to why Yui wanted him to stand around doing nothing. In the meantime, she finished putting her things away before speaking, “Okay, you can go now.”

Yuuki scratched his head in confusion while he exited the classroom. He spotted Kento waiting nearby and skillfully pivoted, stealthily avoiding the

nuisance altogether. He managed to exit the school and almost reach the gate when someone creeped up behind him and suddenly leapt out in front.

"Ta-da!"

A wild Yui had appeared, spreading her arms and striking a fabulously bizarre pose.

"What?"

"Let's walk home together," she said, flashing him her trademark smile.

Yuuki looked dubious, but allowed her to join him on the walk home. They continued to walk side-by-side, but it bugged him a little that the way she asked appeared to imply that this was now the norm.

"Didn't you say you bike to school if it isn't raining?" he asked her, subconsciously glancing at her every now and then.

Though the windy skies were still littered with clouds, the forecast had predicted a zero percent chance of rain today despite the oncoming typhoon. Sure enough, not a single drop of rain had fallen since the morning. All these little clues lead Yuuki to have some reasonable doubts about the entire situation, and an important question began to surface in his mind. *Just why would she walk instead of using her bike?*

"Just thought I should walk more. Figured I could use the exercise."

"Walking off that extra fat?"

"What did you just say?"

Yuuki realized much too late that he shouldn't joke about such things with girls. Judging by the furious look in Yui's eyes, he'd have some trouble digging himself out of the hole he'd just dived headfirst into.

"Sorry. What I meant to say is that, uh, you don't look overweight at all."

"C-Can you just stop staring at me like that please?"

"You have nice legs, too."

Her slim legs extended from her slightly above-average length skirt and down to her navy-blue socks and black loafers.

"Th-That's sexual harassment plain and simple, mister! It's the current year, so you better be prepared to face the consequences, ya hear me?!" Yui shouted, clearly flustered. She pulled down on the hem of her skirt in a failed attempt to hide the entirety of her lower body from Yuuki.

"Oh, right. My bad. I will never say anything like that ever again."

"But no, yeah, it's true. I don't blame you for saying it," she replied almost before Yuuki was done speaking, making the situation awkward yet

again.

"You like being praised?" he asked.

"I never said that."

"I don't think I get girls."

"A maiden's heart is an enigma, never forget."

Wonder where she heard that from? It sounds nothing like her, Yuuki thought. He resolved to keep it to himself though, for his own sake, and the two of them continued on in silence.

"You know, the whole 'exercise' thing was an excuse just so I could walk home with you," Yui confessed with a smirk, leaning closer onto Yuuki.

I should have known. She's really got her sights locked on me.

As long as he was stuck sitting next to her, he had no way of actually steering clear of her. He was at a loss on what to say, and who could blame him? The silence was eventually broken by Yui's grumbling.

"You put your wall back up and are hiding behind it as usual, huh?"

"You think so? I feel like I've been more approachable lately."

"As if. I'd need the Spear of Longinus to penetrate through your defensive field."

Yui tried her best to keep the conversation alive, but ultimately the silence prevailed. Yuuki stole some glances at Yui while they silently continued their walk home, and she looked genuinely dispirited. He remembered her telling him that long silences made her feel anxious, but it didn't seem that she was going to be the one to break the lull in conversation herself this time.

"It's not that I'm in a bad mood or anything," Yuuki reassured her.

"Huh?"

"It's just that I'm not good at talking to people. The aloof nature doesn't help either," he continued.

Yui suddenly locked eyes with him, her surprise apparent. This eventually melted into a gentle grin as her eyes began to sparkle.

"This is going to sound pretty cliché, but I won't let you off the hook that easy," she said, her voice slowly regaining its liveliness once again. "I personally plan on seeing all the versions of you that you've got hidden inside. Like your angry face, or your vexed face, and most importantly, your crying face," she snickered to herself, trying to contain her laughter.

“So you're essentially planning on bullying me?” He asked, bewildered. *She looks in a better mood at least,* he thought.

“Hey, what do you say we take a detour?” she asked happily and moved a step closer to Yuuki.

“Where exactly?”

“You know, somewhere,” she answered. She was being awfully ambiguous for someone who thought up the plan in the first place. Not only that, but Yuuki had been planning on heading directly home, so he politely turned down her offer.

“I don’t like leaving my sister home alone. Maybe another time, though,” he refused in a conciliatory tone.

Yuuki simply couldn’t leave Mina alone in their apartment, especially after the stunt she’d pulled yesterday. She’d gotten it into her head that mixing mints and soda was a great idea because of some videos she’d found online. By the time Yuuki got home, the floor was already nearly beyond saving. To make matters even worse, Mina didn’t look one bit sorry about what she did; in fact, she might’ve even looked thrilled about it.

Perhaps it was already too late. Mina constantly boasted about how she’s always the first to leave class when the bell rang. Even though technically school policy dictated that everyone pick a club to join, she ditched her art club duties in favor of coming home early every day. Despite all of the details he needed to consider, Yuuki wasn’t about to bore Yui with them.

“Hmm, worried about your sister, huh?” Yui asked with an exaggerated nod. “You haven’t messaged her much today, though.”

“Is there a daily quota I need to hit?” he asked sarcastically after a short pause.

“Must be hard, you poor thing,” she said, closing her eyes in a dramatic display of pain. Yuuki quickly dismissed her drama queen act, however.

“I don’t know why you care that much about me, anyway. I’m just another classmate to you.”

“Don’t say that. The Narito stocks are goin’ through the roof right now. For me anyways. I think you’re up there at the top among the people I’m interested in,” she said with a smug smirk. Unfortunately for her, Yuuki knew that she only smiled that way when she felt like she’d managed to pull something sneaky, so he called her bluff.

“Oh yeah? So who’s the runner-up, then?”

“H-Huh? Umm, I’m not really sure.”

“Knew it. There is no point in rankings if nobody else is actually competing, bluffer.”

“Bet that sounded a lot cooler in your head. And besides, I think you’re using that word wrong.”

“Since we’re on the topic, I think you’re the girl I’ve talked to the most... and the one who I’ve walked home with the most, as well.”

“Really now? And who’s in second place?”

“... Okay, you got me there,” he admitted. After all, he couldn’t actually recall the last time he’d had a conversation with another girl. Yui seemed delighted by his response, as if she’d been expecting it from the very beginning.

“Haah, you’re making me seriously worried about your future social life here. You can’t stay like this forever, you know? You gotta get out there and meet people! Otherwise, you won’t make it as an adult. I know you, uhh, don’t have many friends, but... umm, you wouldn’t happen to also have a girlfriend, right? R-Right?”

“Sorry?”

“Huh?” They stared at each other, each clearly bewildered for completely different reasons. “Y-You have one then?” Yui blinked in surprise.

“Nah, I don’t,” Yuuki replied as both of them continued to stare suspiciously at each other. Yui was the first to break the awkward stalemate with a round of nervous laughter.

“Haha, y-yeah, figured as much.”

“Sorry. You sounded a lot like my sister there; she keeps nagging me to get a girlfriend lately.”

“I-Is she? Wow. A-And what about it, Yuuki? Got anyone you’re interested in?”

“Not at all. Don’t think there’s a girl out there who’d want to be my girlfriend just because I asked.”

“Ooh, I see. B-But yeah, that was pretty, erm, unexpected. Particularly from you of all people. Would have never guessed that such a juicy story was so close, waiting to be uncovered. P-Pffftt,” she tried to fake a breathy laugh, but faltered, shooting him a wry smile while sneaking glances back at him.

She's really pushing it now. I gotta give her a stern talking to, at least just this once, Yuuki thought. Even he had a limit to his patience, especially now that Yui was blatantly making fun of him. He looked straight at her and spoke frankly, "Hey, can we just stop this game or whatever? It's a huge waste of time."

Yuuki was so concise and straight to the point that it wiped the smile straight off Yui's face. She tensed up and glared at him with piercing eyes. She then looked away and took a few brief steps in his direction before she gazed up at him once more.

"I'm not playing a game here," she insisted as she gripped her handbag so tight that her knuckles turned white, "I'm serious about this."

Yui did her best to stare fiercely into Yuuki's eyes, almost daring him to do something about it, but it wasn't long before her expression softened just a bit. Her act, if it truly was an act, was much too believable for Yuuki to simply brush off. However, he was still armed with the truth.

I'm sure you are. You wouldn't have an undefeated record otherwise. While he did keep his composure, the fact remained that even he was shocked. This was the true Seatmate Killer in action. She'd just made all of her shenanigans leading up to this point look like a mere warmup.

These were the exact kinds of statements that she'd devised in order to mislead whoever was unfortunate enough to sit next to her, to lead them on toward horrible "misunderstandings." Yuuki could feel her powerful determination. He now realized she would stop at nothing to make her seatmate fall in love with her.

It's pathological with this one.

"Heh-heh," she laughed bashfully in a manner that can only be described as so masterful that it utterly captivated Yuuki.

I think I understand now why Keitarou and Kento didn't stand a chance.

Yui squirmed in place a bit, a nervous blush on her cheeks while she hesitantly tried to piece together a coherent sentence, "So, yeah, I would like to get to know you better if possi—"

She was interrupted by a sudden gust of wind. Her hair fluttered in the air, but the wind was also strong enough to lift her skirt.

"Wh-Whaaaa?!" Yui shrieked. She panicked and tried to keep her skirt pinned down using her hands, but it was too little too late—her underwear was on full display. Her strange screams continued as she squatted down,

frantically holding her skirt in place. Her face was redder than the ripest tomato.

Yuuki wasn't at fault by any stretch of the imagination, but she nevertheless stared daggers at him. He'd been standing in the same direction that the gust blew in from, so nothing particularly serious happened to him. Really, it was Yui's own fault for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

When the wind finally settled down, Yui remained crouched on the ground. Yuuki began to feel somewhat guilty, since even though it was entirely unintentional, he still managed to get a good look up her skirt. He decided he'd try to cheer her up with a few words of encouragement.

"... C-Cute panties you're wearing."

It *did* cross Yuuki's mind that it might not be the best idea to bring up what just happened. After all, despite their similarities, this wasn't Mina he was talking to; in fact, he'd only just been warned about this sort of thing a moment ago. Still, this was the best he could do with his impressive lack of experience with girls.

At any rate, Yui stood up without a word. If anything, she looked a bit unconcerned with what'd just happened, but her lips were quivering slightly, and her face was still a bright red. Yuuki waited patiently for whatever she was going to say, but to his surprise, she just turned and walked off in a huff.

Damn, did I blow it? Yuuki considered chasing after her, but stayed planted in place instead, simply watching her slowly get further and further away. *Whatever the case, it seems her problem is more deep-rooted than I thought,* he continued. He couldn't help but wonder what it was that was driving her to such obsessive lengths to achieve absolute victory against her seatmate.

I really do think she's a good person on the inside, but...

He again ruminated on the fact that Yui might have gone through a traumatic event that altered her personality, much like Mina had with their mother's death.

Maybe she used to sit next to a psycho killer who murdered her parents? Or maybe she's clinging to some promise she made with a long-departed friend? Possibly a way to maintain a bond with a long-lost brother, or maybe just some messed up family tradition that she can't dare disobey?

Man, those white panties looked really cute on her, and that tiny bow on top really brought the whole thing together.

Yuuki's mind raced through an abundance of possibilities, but he simply could not land on a believable answer. The only thing he knew for sure was that he felt sorry for her, whatever her trauma was.

I don't know if it was fate or whatever that brought us to those adjacent seats, but... I really do want to help her in any way I can. He knew that he needed to remain calm and show lots of patience so that she could one day get better while he looked on from afar. That's what Mina needed to break out of her blues, and now nobody could ever even guess that she'd been so depressed in the past.

They really are alike, after all. I should make sure to be kinder to her from now on.

◆◇

Yui ran from Yuuki like her very life depended on it. She zipped into her home and beelined directly for her room, slamming the door and jumping onto her bed in one swift motion. She then buried her face into the pillow and smacked her legs against the mattress.

Oh god, this is bad. What do I do?! Yui's mind was racing, and she was in total disarray. *I said it! I finally told him that I'm not playing a game!*

Yui had initially wanted to wait and see how their relationship naturally progressed before she told him anything like that, but she'd gotten carried away in the heat of the moment.

"Hey, can we just stop this game or whatever? It's a huge waste of time."

Yuuki's words echoed through her mind. They were so sudden; she'd never expected him to use such a serious tone on her out of the blue like that.

I did it! And straight to his face no less!

It truly wasn't a game; it was an honest-to-goodness confession. One that made known her intention of genuinely making him fall for her, one that admitted her burning desire to catch his attention.

He saw everything too.

What horrible, hectic timing for her underwear to be put on full display just when she'd confessed to him. It was too embarrassing, and she couldn't

bear to stay around him at that moment. Her knee stung as she recalled everything.

Ouch, my knee still hurts from when I fell and scraped it on the way home... Ah! What if someone else saw my underwear while I was on the ground? God! I just want to disappear, Yui struggled to keep herself composed. The fact that Yuuki may be at home now trying to make sense of her words certainly didn't help either.

He should've sent me a text by now or even called, right? And what should I do if he asked me point blank what I meant? Do I have it in me to say it again? Isn't the timing horrible since he just saw my panties?

Yui contemplated the situation from every possible angle, going through a million hypotheticals in her head. It did nothing to help sort the clutter in her head, however. Her thoughts were interrupted when her phone vibrated—it was a message from Yuuki.

"It's fine, you don't have to worry about anything," it read.

"What do you mean?" she replied. Were they having this conversation in person, she likely would have stuttered like crazy. That message could have a thousand different meanings, and her heart raced while she awaited his clarification.

"I don't think anyone else saw it."

"Ugh! That's what you're worried about?!" she shouted at the top of her lungs as she sprung out of her bed and hurled her phone at the sheets. *What'd he say about them anyways? They're cute? Was that supposed to be a compliment?! I should've slapped him on the spot. Ugh, whatever, I'm gonna sleep my troubles away.* Just as her head hit the pillow, the door swung open, and her sister barged into her room.

"Hey!" Yui exclaimed. "Ever heard of knocking?!"

"What are you screaming about? I could hear you kicking the bed from the other room, and I'm sure you've got the neighbors worried, too," Maki said, staring at Yui with a quirked eyebrow.

"O-Oh, you're home early today, Sis," Yui said, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction, "What about university?"

"Only had morning classes today, so I got to get off early," Maki replied in an almost musical tone.

"Laid back as always."

"I may not look it, but I'm very busy! Sometimes. Anyways, could you be a dear and make me some lunch? Could really go for some meat today."

“I’m not your maid. Make it yourself.”

“I just can’t cook as good as you,” Maki said, her flattery obviously facetious. She’d already changed into her comfy pajamas and had clearly no intention of cooking, grocery shopping, or doing anything but lounging about.

“Where’s Mom?”

“She went out to dinner with some housewives from work. Didn’t she tell you?”

“Again?”

Their mother took every opportunity to shirk any and all of her motherly duties. Her irresponsible nature was so severe that Yui genuinely believed that Maki inherited all of her laziness from their mother.

“I’m sorry, I'm just not feeling it today,” Yui replied.

“What happened? Oh, you’ve got a notification waitin’.”

“Hm?” Yui looked at Maki, who’d already scooped up her phone from the bed. Yui’s eyeballs nearly popped out of her head in a panic before she hastily snatched the phone back from her sister. “Do you not know the meaning of privacy?!”

“He said he was sorry if he made you angry. How kind of him.”

“Don’t read my texts out loud!”

“Yuuki Narito, huh? Yuuki, got it,” Maki spoke slowly, like she was considering something and committing his name to memory.

“Forget it right away!” Yui shouted. *Stupid! I can never let my guard down around her! One mistake, and look what happened...*

“So is that *the* guy?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Did anything happen between you two? You can tell me. I’m all ears. It’ll be our little secret.”

“No thank you. Shoo, now!” Yui yelled as she shoved her sister out of her room. She then stared at her phone for a good while, contemplating how she should reply to Yuuki.

“I’m not angry at all. Sorry to leave you alone back there.”

“Don’t worry about it. Glad you’re OK.”

His reply was polite and quick. So quick, in fact, that it made Yui a bit suspicious. Whatever the case, she had a feeling that things were going to be very awkward when they met at school tomorrow.

Chapter Eight

A Present

The very next morning, Yui walked into the classroom to find Yuuki already seated at his desk. It was a bit unusual, to say the least. Yui had once again opted to walk to school today, but she'd still expected to arrive earlier than him.

She hesitantly approached her seat and propped her umbrella up against her desk, since the umbrella stand by the entrance had been full. That wasn't unexpected, seeing as the typhoon was drawing near and was probably going to arrive in full sometime between the late hours of the evening and the early hours of tomorrow morning. Of course, that also meant that Yui couldn't afford to pull any more of her antics with the umbrella like "forgetting" it. That would only make her look silly, after all.

"Good morning," Yuuki greeted her while she finished setting her bag down on her desk. Yui was understandably alarmed, because this was the first time he'd ever said hello first.

"Morning," she replied, feigning composure.

"You look sleepy."

"Same goes for you."

By default, Yuuki always looked like he could've used more sleep, but that was rarely the case for Yui. She couldn't get any shut-eye yesterday, not after what happened. Besides, the rattling of the wind against her windows was far from a soothing lullaby, and that might've been the reason why she looked out of sorts compared to her usual self.

"Here, I got this for you," he said and extended his arm just as Yui was sitting down.

"Huh? What's this?"

"A present."

In his hand, Yuuki held some kind of accessory. It was a small stone on a string the size of a bean, and its color was a mixture of milky-white and a hint of yellow. The stone was luminescent and shone brightly enough that Yui could tell that it wasn't some cheap knick-knack that could be found around any corner. Needless to say, she was bewildered. She timidly stared at it as she gently took it from Yuuki.

"Wow, it's so... pretty."

“They say these crystals have healing powers, too. It’s all yours.”

“Wha—? Are you sure?”

“Of course. My dad is really into these things, so we have tons of them lying around the house.”

“I see. W-Well, thanks a bunch,” she managed to say, still baffled at his sudden change in behavior. The day was full of yet more surprises, though, as Yui was in for another shocker when Yuuki busted out a smile of all things.

That’s not the kind of smile that’d get the heart racing by any means, but... he just really surprised me, that’s all, Yui used such thoughts to try to justify her confusion to herself. “B-But why’re you giving me this all of a sudden? What’s the catch here?” she continued, trying her best to act natural.

“Well, I heard it also helps with stress and soothes your worries, apparently.”

“R-Really now? Well, I guess stress is common enough for this to be super handy.”

At first, she’d been suspicious as to why Yuuki would get her a present for seemingly no reason, but felt reassured when he explained the purpose the stone served. Ironically, the fact that *he* was the reason she was getting so stressed lately would remain unknown to him.

“Must be especially hard for you.”

“Why are you acting like I’ve got some kind of mental disorder?” she asked. *He must think I’m some weirdo after yesterday. Just some girl with a few screws loose trying to get her seatmate to fall in love with her,* she reflected on the situation before proceeding to clear up his misunderstanding. “Whatever you think I’m suffering from, I’m not. Capiche?”

“Please don’t worry, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“No seriously, you’ve clearly misread the situation...”

“Quick! Use the stone!”

“Zip it already!”

Yuuki was as persistent as a tutorial NPC refusing to let the player proceed further into the game without wasting a healing item first. So Yui finally gave in and squeezed the crystal so hard that, for a moment, she was afraid she was going to crush it in her hands. Strangely enough, she felt her anger melt away as she continued to clutch the stone.

Guess that's how it's used?

"Give me your hand," Yuuki requested as he extended his arm out to her once she had calmed down.

Yuuki was acting seriously strange today. This pushy attitude was entirely unlike him. Yui was again very doubtful of him, but she slowly reached her hand out to him and said, "Now what?"

"Trust me," he said and plopped something round in her hand.

"And this is?"

"Candy."

"I'm not a child."

"I know. Try it anyway. I promise it's not a marble or whatever."

"I know candy when I see it, thank you very much," she continued after tossing the candy in her mouth, "What's the deal with you today?"

"Have some chocolate too, if you want."

"I asked you a question," Yui said impatiently. Yuuki was seemingly unaffected, since he ignored her and rifled around inside his backpack. Eventually, her annoyed gaze got his attention, and he cracked yet another smile as he faced her once more.

"I think there's a reason we ended up next to one another."

"And what does that have to do with you acting weird?"

"I just want to help you however I can. I'll listen if you want to talk about anything," he responded with a calm and gentle voice.

His voice had actually been on Yui's mind for a while; it was awfully soothing for a boy who doesn't speak much. She dreaded to think what would become of her if he ever whispered like that in her ears.

"Th-That's nice of you, but what exactly does that mean?" she asked, having pulled herself out of her musings.

"Hmm. How about you tell me about your dreams, for example."

Maybe I should just bite the bullet and tell him that I want a boyfriend? The way he's acting's got me thinking that he'd actually volunteer, she pondered. *Actually, while I'm already at it, I might as well come clean all the way and tell him that I want him to love me for real. No games, no messing around. Maybe it'll work better if I asked with puppy-dog eyes? Ugh! As if!*

Yui ultimately scrapped the idea altogether. The whole thing reeked of a setup. Even if Yuuki wasn't some devious trap master, she couldn't possibly

blurt out something that embarrassing. The thought alone made her teeth chatter.

"You're messing with me, aren't you?" she asked.

"Huh? You're the one messing with me, considering what you've been up to lately," came his rebuttal.

He had a point, but Yui still wasn't buying it. Certainly this was some ploy to get her back for all of the mischief she'd caused.

"Ohhh, I get it," she said. "So this is your idea of payback, huh? I see."

"I'm being sincere here. You're just as guarded as ever."

"Hey! What's that supposed to mean?" she protested, hurling a hostile gaze at him. It was to no avail, however, as his response came in the form of a faint smile.

Why does it feel like he's playing the role of an understanding older brother placating his upset sister? I mean, he did mention—wait, could that be it? Could he have figured out how I actually feel about him after yesterday's kerfuffle? That'd explain this drastic change in his personality...

The situation between them was growing increasingly complicated with layers upon layers of what ifs and doubts that it threw any and all of Yui's plans into complete disarray.

I'll look way too desperate if I surrender now. Even if everything turned out great, she did not like the sort of power balance that giving in would establish. She felt she would never be able to challenge that dynamic going forward.

Now determined, she pulled herself together and concluded that the best course of action was to instead work toward making him be the one to confess rather than just keep doing whatever it was he was doing now. Her mind was now set; she would achieve a crushing victory in this titillating game they found themselves engaged in.

"J-Just what has gotten into you, Yuuki? You're being so nice today... Have you finally realized just how cute I am?"

"Pretty much. I thought about it, and I think I really misunderstood you before."

What does he mean by that? Is the jig actually up? Why do I feel like he's still missing something dreadfully important? I can't read him at all, she thought before exhaling harshly, upset.

"Hm? Anything wrong?"

He's a formidable opponent to be sure. How can I ever hope to beat someone who's got a poker face literally all the time?! Think Yui, think! There has to be a way to one up him once and for all!

"I'm glad you like my present."

"Yeah, I think it'll come in handy," she said with a smile. Her hand trembled as it gripped the stone.

It looked like Yuuki's present was already being put to good use.

Chapter Nine

Cyute Mode

The evening of that same day.

Maki got out of the bath and ambled up the stairs. As she walked down the hallway to her room, something bright in the corner of her eye caught her attention. She stopped and turned to examine it closer. It was a sticky note stuck to the middle of Yui's closed door that read, "Please knock before entering."

She'd been feeling a bit lonesome because Yui had been shutting herself away in her room a lot more often lately, and this sticker only renewed some of those feelings. The time they spent together was diminishing more and more against Maki's will. She felt that the two of them should be getting along better, especially considering that they were sisters.

So of course, Maki decided to check up on her sister. She quietly opened the door just a crack, then peeked in without Yui noticing.

Yui was lying on her back on top of her bed. Her arm was outstretched above her head, and there was some sort of necklace dangling from it. Sensing that things were about to get real interesting, Maki properly barged into the room to get a better look at the peculiar item.

"Whatcha got there?"

"Eek!" Yui shrieked, the blood draining from her face as if she'd just seen a ghost. She shot straight up and hid the necklace behind her back.

"No seriously, what is it?" Maki asked again, pointing.

"Wh-What's what?"

"That thing you're hiding behind your back," she responded.

Yui seemed to understand that there was no hiding anything from her nosy sister, so she gave in and showed it to her.

Doesn't look like a proper gem, but rather just some colorful stone, thought Maki. *It's probably one of those healing crystal things.*

"Heh-heh," Yui laughed smugly, "Beautiful, isn't it? I got it as a present today~"

"From that Yuuki guy, I'm assuming? Huh, things with him are moving pretty fast."

"You could say that," Yui replied with a stiff smile.

“It’s really pretty. What do you call these again?” Maki inquired as she continued to examine the necklace.

“I forget, but it’s supposed to help relieve stress, I guess.”

“Huh? You’ve been stressed lately?”

Yui’s expression turned serious for a mere second before her forced smile returned.

“Oh well,” Maki continued without waiting for her sister’s reply. “Anyways, a present out of the blue? I guess someone is feeling bold.”

“I know, right? Should I tell him that I don’t like pushy boys? Haha!”

“Should you now?” Maki asked. She approached Yui, whose eyes were clearly wandering around the room and away from her. “Should you reaaally?”

Maki moved closer and closer into Yui’s personal space before Yui suddenly shut her eyes. Maki realized that her sister was trembling, and before she knew it, Yui’d jumped onto her. She clung to her and buried her face into Maki’s stomach.

“Waaah! Big Sissss!” Yui pleaded.

“Aww, what’s wrong, Yui? Here now, it’s all going to be just fine,” Maki did her best to comfort her without losing her balance as she gently held her sister.

“Stop touching my butt, and pat my head instead!” Yui protested and brushed Maki’s perverted hands away. “Waaah! A perverted old maaaaan is attacking me!”

“Who are you calling an old man?”

“He knows about my feelings, and he’s playing around with meee! I’m losing the fight!” Yui continued whining.

“Since when did love turn into a war?”

“I can’t let him have his way! They say a relationship goes off much better when the woman’s the dominant one, right?! Besides, who likes getting teased anyway? Not me! I hate it! It makes me so mad! I’m not some twisted freak who gets off on being belittled! If anything, I’m a sadist!”

Sure you are, Maki thought, though she didn’t dare interrupt Yui’s borderline uncharacteristic rant.

“Actually,” Yui declared loudly, “it’s over for you once you become the obedient one in the relationship, yeah? Whoever confesses first is straight outta luck! That’s what happens, right? Right?!”

“You’re being a real pain right now. Just tell him how you feel and get it over with,” Maki finally spoke up since she’d realized that Yui would just keep winding herself up otherwise.

“No! Way too embarrassing! What would I do if he rejected me?!”

“So *that’s* why you’re whining about it? I think we’re done here,” Maki said as she pushed Yui away. Pitifully, that only made Yui cling on harder, and she began tearing up.

“Waaah! Help me, Sis! What should I do?”

“Whoa, Yui’s activated her c*yu*te mode? It’s been a while.”

“What does that even meaaan?”

“C*yu*te Mode,” as Maki has dubbed it, is the needy, spoiled side of Yui that surfaced every time she felt stuck in any big dilemma. The biggest symptom of c*yu*te mode was that Yui abandoned all logical thought and instead begged for help from anyone around. In other words, she was reduced to what could only be described as a crybaby. On the other hand, she became very suggestible, like a very cute but gullible child. C*yu*te mode was too enticing for Maki to resist, and she couldn’t help but bully Yui even more whenever she got this way.

“Want your big sister to tell you what you’re doing wrong?” Maki teased, dragging out her words and pinching poor Yui’s cheeks.

“Wh-Whaat’ds dzat?”

“You aren’t being honest with yourself! Come on, let me hear you say ‘I love you.’” Maki demanded as if she was admonishing a child.

If Yui were her normal self, she would most likely toss a cold gaze at her sister and turn her down without as much as a second thought. In this state, though, it was an entirely different story; she was bashfully squirming around, blushing, and stuttering.

“I w-wuv youuu... Pwease go out... with m-me.”

“Hmm? Who’s an adorable little mouse? You are, Yui! Yes, you are!”

“N-No I’m not!”

“Aww, how unfortunate. You couldn’t even say it right,” Maki said, looking satisfied. She was having too much fun toying with Yui.

“You’re such a bully!” Yui yelled as she smacked her sister’s thighs.

“Oww, that hurts. Ouch! I mean it! It hurts a lot! Can you stop hitting me with that damn rock?”

Yui’s fists packed a considerable oomph to them, and the added damage of the stone almost turned some innocent fun between sisters into

something much more dire.

Using a healing crystal to injure people. How ironic, Maki thought to herself. She wouldn't have minded a healthy quarrel if Yui was still a child. It wasn't the same now that she's all grown up and was more than capable of leaving a bruise or two. Maki eventually shoved Yui away from her and tried to calm her down as best she could.

"Take a deep breath, and calm down. You okay now? Good. Listen, I personally think the guy has another girl he's interested in. Yeah, definitely."

"Wha—?! But he said he didn't have a girlfriend..."

"And you believed him just because he said so? Ha. How naive of you, Yui. My intuition is telling me that you're his fallback girl."

"Fallback girl?"

"Yes. Think of it like this: there's this one girl he's actually super into, but he's weighing her against you to try to decide which is the best fit for him. Like, of course he's got a reason why he gave you a present, too."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh!" Yui said, completely enthralled by Maki's nonsense theory.

"See, he was trying to see what kind of reaction you'd have to it, Yui. Basically, he's testing you."

"Oh! Everything makes so much sense now!" Yui shouted excitedly, nodding along and admiring her sister's deduction skills. These pure and innocent reactions were what made Maki get so carried away and slip in some half-truths into whatever she was saying.

"But all hope is not lost! It only takes the slightest of nudges to turn the tables entirely! You've still got a chance! It'll be okay, Yui. You're a sweet and cute girl. The sweetest!"

"Yeah!"

"You just need to show him more of your womanly appeal. You lack the more... devilish side of a woman, understand? You honestly come off like an old man sometimes."

"Devilish!"

"I want you to show me—I mean him, that mischievous and attractive side you've got hidden down deep inside."

"Mischievous and attractive?"

"That's right! That's how you're going to get him! Take no prisoners!"

“OOOOOHH!” Yui let out a battle cry in a deep, guttural tone and raised her fist in the air. It seemed that the old Yui had once again returned to the world of the living.

I always tell her to stop doing that. Oh well, guess the fun is over.

“I’m going to do it! Yui the mischievous little devil is finally going to make her debut!”

“That’s the spirit!”

“Sis! Pass me your makeup kit!”

“It’s in the bathroom!” Maki hardly had a chance to point her in the right direction when Yui rushed out of the room.

Maybe I went too far. She’ll easily fall for any old conman the way she is now... Maybe that’s why she’s so into this weird dude this time around?

“God, you can’t possibly be that daring, Yui. But, you’re so adorable that any man would fall for you,” Maki began mumbling to herself. “Then again, I don’t want her showing that special, exclusive side of her to just some random guy off the street.”

Maki knew nothing about Yuuki other than his name, but she had a sneaking suspicion that he might be a textbook example of a playboy. After all, he was familiar enough with women to give Yui that kind of present.

I’ve gotta think up a way to meet him myself, Maki thought when her musings were suddenly interrupted by a scream coming from the bathroom.

“Sis! I messed it up *bad*! Help me out here!” Yui shouted as she burst into the room with half her face covered in clownlike proportions of powder.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Maki replied.

She took Yui’s hand and led her back to the bathroom.

Chapter Ten

Mischievous Little Devil Yui

"Yuuukkie!"

"Yuuuukkiee!"

"YUU-KI!"

"BAAAAH!"

The eerie scream of a vengeful spirit roused Yuuki from his slumber. His ears rang as he blinked his eyes open to find Mina sitting next to him. She was wearing an apron over her pajamas and was holding a dollar-store-quality megaphone in a threatening manner.

"Ah, wakey-wakey, Yukkie! You can't keep sleeping in like this!" she yelled through the megaphone.

Yuuki frowned, hard, and who could blame him? It wasn't every day that one got blasted with a megaphone point-blank first thing in the morning. He lazily rubbed his eyes—it was going to be one of *those* days. He was extremely tired, and he knew why; he dedicated a lot of energy to playing the role of the kind and understanding older brother with Yui yesterday. A part of him wished he could act the same way toward Mina on a daily basis. He felt like she wouldn't be half the trouble if he could.

"Earth to Yukkie! You alive?"

"My face hurts. Smiled too much yesterday..."

"You must've pushed yourself too hard."

It'd been a long time since his face muscles had been quite this sore. He always felt lethargic when he overdid it, but in a way, this was who he was. Yuuki had managed to recover some of his energy over the night, though he was perfectly aware that one could never be sure about such things. And so he turned over to the other side of the bed and closed his eyes once again.

"Goodnight."

"You can't go back to sleep! It's 10AM!"

"Too sleepy. Can't hear you."

"Oh no! He's become a sloth!" Mina cried out as she climbed over him and pinched his cheeks.

It was innocent fun at first, but her grip grew tighter and tighter until Yuuki felt like his cheeks were getting clamped by a pair of pincers. It was no joke; his face would never recover if he failed to wake up.

“OPEN YOUR EYES! You will die if you fall asleep! Don’t go toward the light! AAAH!” she screamed these and other absurdities at him.

“I get it, I get it. I’m all awake now,” he grumbled as he reluctantly opened his eyes and sat up straight. “Happy?” It was just in the nick of time too, since Mina was about ready to deliver a punch.

“Yukkie is awake! WOOHOO!” she exclaimed as she rolled off him and snuggled up next to him.

The bed was a double sized one that their parents once used, and it was too big for only one person to sleep on. This room used to be their parents’ to begin with, but Yuuki was occupying it for the time being. The bed did, however, take up so much of the room that he was barely left with any personal space at all.

“Go play outside instead.”

“During a typhoon? You monster!”

“Need I remind you how monstrous fratricide is? And while I was trying to sleep no less!” he rebuked her accusation readily. His cheeks still stung, the left one in particular since Mina had focused most of her efforts on pinching and pulling it. He could tell that it must’ve swollen red by now.

Yuuki ambled out of bed and opened the curtains. Sure enough, raindrops were stuck to the window, and he could hear the sound of the wind howling outside. It seemed that the weatherman had been correct once more, and the typhoon had arrived on time.

Now we can’t set foot outside, he thought to himself. *Good thing I went shopping ahead of time*.

Prudent as always, Yuuki had stocked up on supplies the day before. Had the typhoon been considerate enough to arrive on a school day, it would have likely delayed the start of classes or cancelled them altogether. But alas, it was a Saturday.

“Alrighty, Yukkie, I have taken the liberty of making you breakfast,” Mina declared as she led him by the hand to the living room.

I guess she’s still playing homemaker.

“Please wait a moment,” she said after she sat him down. There was a glass of milk and a single baby banana on the table before him. Yuuki did his best to ignore the surreal nature of the scene and politely took a sip of the milk.

“It’s a bit lukewarm. When did you pour it?”

“A while back.”

“No wonder. You should know better.”

“It’s your fault for not gettin’ up on time,” she said as she rummaged around the kitchen.

Yuuki had a bad feeling as he quietly sat and waited at the table. Before long, Mina emerged with two fried eggs on a plate.

“What’d’ya think? I made them all by myself!”

“A bit on the burnt side, but good job.”

“You’re being too picky. They’re just well-done,” she argued.

Yuuki wasn’t entirely convinced, considering that by contrast, hers looked to be half-done. Putting that issue aside, Yuuki turned his attention to yet another problem with the dish in the form of a white condiment spread all over it.

“Is this...?”

“Yup, you got it! It’s mayo!”

“I guess it’s not as bad as putting pineapple on pizza,” he quipped.

It was certainly an unorthodox choice. He knew that Mina could have easily settled for something more traditional like soy sauce, but he forced himself to eat without complaining. While he was focused on his plate, Mina peeled the banana and held it close to his face.

Not the best combination of foods out there, but, well, she did go to the trouble of making it, so finishing it is the least I could do.

“Thank you. That was good.”

“Bien appetit!"

“It’s ‘bon,’ and you’re supposed to say that before you eat.”

After they finished their relatively late breakfast, Yuuki left the living room and headed for their father’s bedroom. Though he was rarely home, he slept there between business trips, so the two siblings didn’t go in it much.

Their father had become more of a spiritual person after their mother had passed away; part of the reason why he chose to sleep in this room in particular was because it apparently had the best flow of “positive energy” inside the apartment. Not only that, but he kept bringing in shady “artefacts” that just cluttered up the room and fed into his superstitions. Amulets, exorcising arrows, small altars, crystals, bracelets, talismans—all sorts of garbage laid about the room. The space even had a strange smell to it thanks to the incense sticks that their father kept burning.

Yuuki opened the sliding door behind which his father's personal belongings were jumbled atop each other in a big pile and began rooting around the drawers within.

"What are you doing, Yukkie?" Mina interrupted, peeking her head over his shoulders.

A chill ran down Yuuki's spine; he could tell something was off. With a horrible shiver, he realized that the problem was in her clothes—or lack thereof. It appeared that Mina had taken her pajamas off earlier and was now strutting around the house in her underwear. Again.

"Put some clothes on."

"You say that a lot."

"Put some clothes on."

"Seriously though, what are you up to?"

"Put some clothes on," Yuuki said a third time. He was determined to not engage with her until she made herself presentable. *I've been spoiling her, but it's about time I drew the line*, he thought.

His sister gave in eventually and left the room, returning shortly after with a T-shirt that just barely covered her panties.

"Wait a second, isn't that my shirt?"

"Muwahaha!"

"Stop right there, criminal!" he exclaimed, but stopped short of demanding she change since something seemed different about her all of a sudden.

Mina looked like she'd just remembered something, and she walked as though in a trance toward the altar that was enshrined in one of the corners of the room. It was on the smaller side, and it could easily be carried around by Yuuki if he really wanted to. She sat herself down directly in front of it. In the middle of the altar was a photograph of their mother alongside another photo of the family all together.

"I forgot to pray today," she said.

Mina's display was a far cry from something as sacred as offering a prayer at a temple, especially considering what she had on, but it was still a daily routine that she partook in. Yuuki was no different, so he walked up and sat down next to her.

"What would our mom think if she saw you like this? She'd be in tears for sure."

“Tears of joy, you mean! We’re sharing clothes just like good siblings should!”

Yuuki wondered if their mother had instructed Mina to get along with him in much the same way she’d told Yuuki to take care of his sister. He couldn’t help but think that Mina was misunderstanding what their mother had said. He couldn’t bring himself to point that out, not now that he was remembering the way Mina used to cry for hours on end in front of their late mother’s picture.

Mina closed her eyes and brought her hands together in a prayer, and Yuuki followed suit.

“What did you pray for, Yukkie?”

“It’s not a wishing well,” he said as he got back to his feet and resumed searching through the drawers.

“You looking for another one of those crystals?” she asked, coming up close to him from behind.

“Yeah. I grabbed the wrong one the other day because you interrupted me.”

“Wish we could load a save every time we messed something up.”

“That’s kinda deep.”

Not only could Yuuki not find what he was looking for, but it appeared that Mina was going to start bothering him again. It didn’t help that the drawers were a complete mess. He’d wanted to ask his father about it, but just yesterday, Yuuki got a text from him informing him that he wouldn’t be able to make it home on account of the typhoon.

Now that he thought about it, Yuuki realized that their father had sounded a bit worried about their well-being, so he figured he’d actually use his phone for its intended purpose for once. This was a good chance to call him up and let him know everything was alright... and also to ask him where he’d stashed the thing Yuuki was looking for.

Now where did I put my phone? Yuuki wondered. He meandered around the house before finally walking into his room. Upon spotting his phone, he noticed he had a new notification from none other than Yui herself.

“Have a selfie! *wink*” read the notification. There was an attachment sent alongside it.

What is this exactly? Yuuki thought to himself, skeptical as always.

The moment of confusion was quickly dispersed as he opened the attachment and realized that it was a picture of Yui. She was making a

peace sign at the camera while giving a broad smile and a cheeky little wink. Her face looked a bit different from usual. Her skin tone was a bit lighter, and her lips and cheeks had just a hint of redness to them. Her eyes were particularly captivating, accentuated perfectly by her curly eyelashes and large irises.

Wow, she's cute. Yuuki was so mesmerized that he couldn't take his eyes off the photo. He hadn't been paying her looks much mind lately, but this selfie definitely reminded him of just how much of a beauty Yui was.

No wonder she's so popular among the boys, he thought. Her pearly whites were so perfect that a mere smile could warm the heart of any man.

He wasn't certain of the correct way to react to an unsolicited selfie, but he assumed he was expected to send one back. In a quintessentially Yuuki fashion, though, he chose to sidestep the issue entirely. "Why are you sending me this?" he replied.

"I wanted to thank you for giving me that present. I feel calm just by looking at it. It has to be the real deal."

"About that... I actually gave you the wrong one. The one you have is supposed to bring you wealth."

Yui didn't reply. The digital silence stretched and stretched until Yuuki finally decided to rule out the possibility that she'd gotten upset at him.

"I'm sorry. Are you angry with me?" read his message.

"Not at all. It happens. We're only human."

"I'm glad it's helping nonetheless. If it ain't broke, don't fix it and all that."

Yui stopped responding once again. Yuuki was now almost certain that she was mad at him, despite her words.

Maybe she's just busy.

"Whatcha up to, Yukkie?" Mina asked. Before he could even turn around, she threw herself at him, causing his phone to slip out of his hands and onto the floor. Mina immediately picked it back up and looked at the screen curiously. "What were you looking at exactly?"

"Doesn't matter. Give it back," he said, trying to snatch his phone away from her.

"Yukkie..." she trailed off. For whatever reason, Mina looked worried, and Yuuki had to wonder what was going on in her head. She then pointed at Yui's photo and started speaking gently. "You can't just throw everything away and obsess over pop idols just cuz you can't get a girlfriend, Yukkie."

“You couldn’t be more wrong. She’s not an idol.”

“No freakin’ way! She definitely looks like one... Ahem. Well anyways. I know she’s super cute, but why are you looking at a complete stranger’s photo?”

“She isn’t a stranger. We were just chatting.”

“Wait, *what*? You’re chatting with *this* hottie? I can’t believe it! This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance!” she said with such enthusiasm that one would be hard-pressed to believe that she was sporting such a sorrowful expression just moments ago.

“Chance? Chance at what?”

“Her name is Yui, huh? She’s so cute. Shooo shooo cute!” she exclaimed as she continued messing with his phone.

Yuuki found Mina’s reaction to be very out of character for her. She made a habit of talking about how much cuter she looked than any celebrities that showed up on TV, so why would she be fawning over another girl like this?

His thought process was interrupted by a slightly saddened sigh coming from Mina. She’d scrolled up to read his earlier conversations with Yui and was now ready to give him some advice. “Yukkie, Yukkie, Yukkie... You gotta show her that you’re interested. Be straightforward! Like, ask her what color panties she’s wearing, for example!”

“My little sister’s got a bright future of debauchery ahead of her. Good to know.”

“Whoa, look! She just said the same exact thing about you!”

Yuuki glanced at his phone and, sure enough, Mina had ever-so-politely inquired about Yui’s underwear.

“Wait, you actually sent it? WHAT THE—”

“Haven’t seen you freak out this bad in ages!”

“Give me the phone. Now.”

“Don’t wanna! Just give me a bit, and I’ll work my fairy godmother magic on her!” Mina argued.

Yuuki was determined, however, and no amount of arguing would stop him from finally retrieving his phone. Once victorious, he realized that it would be a disaster to leave Yui to stew with such a perverted message. Just as he endeavored to clarify the whole misunderstanding, a new message had arrived.

“Oh my! Yuuki, you’re such a pervert!” the message said.

What even?

Yuuki was confused about Yui's apparent shift in demeanor. After all, as far as he knew, she'd never say anything quite so flirty. Of course, he understood that many indicators such as tone and body language were lost in text, but he still suspected that she was up to something.

"I didn't mean to send that," he finally replied to her.

"Oh, really now? What exactly were you imagining when you sent that, Yuuki? Hmm?"

"Your white panties with that cute ribbon on top."

Once again, the replies from Yui stopped coming. Yuuki was just about ready to put an end to this bizarre exchange, but Mina clearly had other plans in mind.

"No, Yukkie! Wait! You can't just leave her on read like that! Gimme gimme!"

"What are you doing? Stop!" Yuuki protested as Mina deftly snatched the phone away from him.

Mina's thumbs moved fast like lightning across the phone's keyboard as she tapped out a message. Her fingers were so nimble that Yuuki could do naught but stand there, jaw agape, admiring her dexterity. The realization that she'd just sent dozens of messages Yui's way startled him back into action, and he wrestled the phone back from his sister.

"What's gotten into you today?!"

"Hey, what did she say? Come on, show me! I wanna know!"

"No, that's the end of that. You've had enough fun," he said, brushing Mina's head to the side when she tried to get a peek at his screen.

Yui's silence was not unexpected after such a barrage of questionable messages, so Yuuki once again sent her a couple more explaining the misunderstanding.

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On the receiving end of Yuuki and Mina's slew of messages sat a dumbfounded Yui, nervously cozy in her bed.

She'd failed miserably at applying her makeup yesterday, but Maki had walked her through it today to outstanding results. It turned out so well that Maki had showered her with heaps of praise, telling her how extremely

adorable she looked. It actually got to be a little annoying. However, Yui herself was somewhat stunned; she'd never gone all out on makeup before.

Maki then produced Yui's phone from somewhere and took shots of Yui from all angles. She even managed to talk her into taking a selfie, then convinced her to send it to Yuuki. In retrospect, Yui felt like she might've gotten too excited by her sister's words and didn't quite understand the consequences of what she was doing. Yui didn't have much time to think about it, though, as Yuuki's own confused message roused her back to reality.

Yui tried to save face by changing the subject to the present she'd received, but she absolutely hadn't expected to be blindsided by the revelation that Yuuki had given her the wrong crystal.

Who wouldn't want a wealth charm anyway?! I could use some more money, and I don't need any magic to relieve my stress since I don't have any to begin with! I've got absolutely NOTHING that worries me! At all! Yui thought, digging her nails deep into the stone as she gripped it. *I've gotta keep my cool. I'm the cute and sexy mischievous little devil Yui! I'm not gonna get all flustered by his weird lewd jokes! I'm the one in control!*

"Your white panties with that cute ribbon on top."

Yui was genuinely determined up until the exact moment she'd read that message and almost choked on her own breath. The mere thought of him remembering her underwear down to such fine details made her face glow a bright red.

A naughty and daring lady would never wear such girly panties. I think I'm not cut out for this whole thing... Maybe this was a bad idea, she pondered to herself, her shoulders dropping in disappointment.

"Your selfie is so cute!"

"Adorable as heck!"

"XOXO"

"I love you, Yui!"

"Love you lots and lots!"

The relentless onslaught of lovey-dovey messages continued. On reading them, Yui choked so hard that all sorts of fluids blew out of her nose and mouth.

I finally got you! I knew all that boys cared about was a pretty face! she declared to herself while wiping her face clean with a tissue. It took some time, but her selfie had finally taken effect.

“I love you too, Yuuki!” she replied. Yui was so wound up that she sent that heavy message without so much as a second thought. *Now we’ve both confessed! We’re officially a couple! I did it! I actually did it!*

Under normal circumstances, Yui would’ve taken a more careful approach. She’d have teased him into stating his intentions clearly before saying anything herself. However, now that she’d replied in the heat of the moment, she believed that such a measured approach simply wasn’t meant to be in the first place.

One thing was for certain: Yuuki was the one who confessed first. That meant a crushing victory for Yui. She was winding up for a roaring victory cry and a prideful winning pose when her celebration came to a surprising halt.

“Sorry about that. My sister snatched my phone and sent those.”

For the third time today, Yui would choke and make a mess of her face once more.

Ohcrapohcrapohcrapohcrap, she thought to herself as she fell into a complete panic. She nearly threw her phone at the wall, but some tiny remaining shred of sanity managed to keep her grounded. From that same shred, an ingenious idea sprouted.

“My sister took mine too and sent that message! Sorry as well!” read her response.

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GOMEN

Just what kind of situation is this? she thought. It was definitely a shot in the dark, but it was all she could do to save herself from this predicament. Now all that was left for her to do was to stare firmly at the screen, anxiously awaiting Yuuki's reply.

"We both have it tough, huh?"

"We sure do!" she responded. *Good GOD, that was too close but, God, in the end, I was able to fool him somehow. Fool him...*

Yui felt all her energy leave her body as she hung her head in defeat. Her phone fell from her hand and landed on the ground, bringing her attention toward something shiny right beside it. She leaned over the edge of her bed to get a better look at it and discovered a 100 yen coin sitting atop the green carpet.

"Whoa, money! The charm's blessed me already! ... Hahaha!" she said aloud to herself, extending her hand out to pick up the coin with a rather worrying smile plastered on her face.

Chapter Eleven

A Day Out With Mina

The typhoon had come and gone in just a day, and the clear weather had returned once more. In fact, it was just the perfect atmosphere to go out on the town. Of course, Yuuki saw no reason why he should leave the comfort of his sofa. He passed the time mindlessly channel surfing when Mina entered his peripheral vision. She was wearing a hooded sweatshirt and some jeans and carried a small red backpack to go along with her low-profile getup.

"You heading out?" asked Yuuki.

"Yep."

"Where to?"

"An anime I like got a movie, and I really wanna see it. Guess I'll also do some shopping while I'm at it," she said hesitantly.

Yuuki stared at her, wide-eyed and bewildered. Mina usually asked for his permission before going out and would hate to leave without him. She tended to persistently badger him until he finally gave in, so her current behavior was entirely out of left field for Yuuki. Needless to say, this was the first time that Mina would be going to the movies on her own, as well.

"Are you sure you'll be alright on your own?"

"Yeah," she said with a nod after a brief pause. She didn't look particularly enthusiastic about it and instead just seemed somewhat restless and visibly stressed.

"Where's this coming from? Did something happen?"

"Nah, it's nothing. Just wanted to go out alone."

"And you're sure you'll be okay? Maybe I should tag along," Yuuki said, noticing Mina glancing strangely at him.

"G-Guess I'll let you come along... If you insist and stuff!" she finally said, stumbling a bit over her words.

Yuuki's worries overturned his desire to remain rooted to the couch, so he quickly tossed on the first thing he found in his wardrobe. He ended up in a simple shirt and a pair of chinos.

"You ready, Yukkie? Alright! Let's blow this popsicle stand!" Mina exclaimed, pumping her arms in the air excitedly.

A pair of bracelets rattled around on her wrists as she jumped around. They were the standard accessory that she wore whenever she went out. Both bracelets were colored very differently from each other, and Mina insisted that they were actually charms that helped keep evil spirits at bay. Of course, she meant any poor sod that happened to look somewhat scary. All sorts of unsuspecting people fell into that category, including Yuuki's unfortunate friend, Keitarou.

As soon as they left the apartment, Mina retrieved a cap from her backpack and put it on. It had the letter "M" embroidered onto the side, and it was something their mother had encouraged Mina to buy under the pretext that the letter "M" stood for "Mina." Even though that letter probably meant something else entirely, it was still one of Mina's favorites.

The pair set out for their destination: the movie theater located just near the train station. That area in particular was also littered with bookstores, electronics stores, and anime merch shops, making it an absolute heaven on earth for Mina.

"Set sail! It's time to depart!" Mina declared with vigor. She assumed the lead and skipped down the steps and to the road which led to the train station.

Once again, she was acting peculiarly out of character. Normally, she'd stick close to Yuuki like there was no tomorrow and hold his hand tight. She insisted that holding hands allowed her charms to protect him from evil spirits, as well. Yet today, she did none of those things and remained abnormally quiet.

Mina strode with unbridled energy down the road, but her pace suddenly decreased once she spotted a group of young men loitering around a convenient store. She maneuvered herself behind Yuuki, seeking protection from what were undoubtedly evil spirits. She even pulled her hat down over her eyes.

Acting pretty suspect today, Yuuki thought.

As soon as they passed the group, Mina emerged from her hiding spot, springing forward once again. Again, though, her footsteps would begin to falter the closer they got to the station as the masses of people grew more dense. The situation within the station was even more hectic, and Mina looked so overwhelmed that she kept nearly bumping into the busy oncoming throngs.

Eventually, Mina ground to a halt. She looked around in a panic, seeming to have lost all sight of where to go. Yuuki had been watching her silently, but he couldn't bear to watch his sister in such a state of dismay any longer. He grabbed her hand and navigated around and through the waves of people in the direction of the sky bridge that connected the east and west sides of the station.

By the time they'd managed to make it out, it was already lunch time. Yuuki decided to grab some grub at a nearby fast food place.

"What do you wanna eat?" Yuuki asked as they took their place in line.

"I'll order on my own," Mina replied.

Yet another unexpected answer from his little sister, but Yuuki respected her wishes and only ordered his share. Mina, on the other hand, had trouble placing her order. Her voice was too quiet, and the cashier asked her to repeat herself several times. Again, Yuuki was unable to keep still and watch his sister squirm, so he eventually gave the order on her behalf.

"You're probably pretty hungry," Yuuki said while he sat down in his seat. Mina only silently nodded and said nothing at all. *I guess she's just tired.*

The grand smile returned to Mina's face the second she sank her teeth into her hamburger. She began to chatter about how excited she was for the movie. Just as her enthusiasm was about to reach new levels, a group of girls her age sat down at the table next to theirs. Mina's mood took another downturn, and she dejectedly hung her head once more. The girls being so loud annoyed Yuuki, as well. Both siblings finished their meals as fast as they could and vacated the restaurant.

After a good few minutes of walking, they soon reached the theater. As was becoming today's theme, Mina took the lead only to surrender it back to Yuuki once she reached the counter. They purchased their tickets, along with some drinks and a bag of caramel popcorn, and made their way to their seats. Mina was still not being herself. Rather than immediately gorging herself on the popcorn, she meekly sat down in her seat.

Eventually, the lights dimmed, not only signaling the start of the movie screening, but also the beginning of the onslaught of an evil spirit that Yuuki wasn't protected against: his own sheer drowsiness.

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“That was soooo good!” Mina joyously exclaimed, jabbering fervently about her impressions of the movie as the two of them walked out the theater. “But, but you slept through it!”

“Nuh-uh,” Yuuki refuted. *I only rested my eyes for a second.*

Their next destination was the mall that housed Mina’s favorite anime merch shop. In fact, all of the shops there were themed around anime, each of which offered a plethora of merchandise from all sorts of genres for all sorts of fans.

Mina’s goal for today was to acquire the newest release of a manga she liked alongside some other anime goods. Mina tended to enjoy shounen manga rather than shoujo ones, so Yuuki got to enjoy whatever she bought once she was finished.

“Let’s see what’s in our budget this month!” Mina exclaimed as she scoured through the shelves and simultaneously triple-checked the contents of her purse.

On any other day of the week, Mina would’ve stuffed everything she wanted into the shopping basket and asked Yuuki if she could buy the stuff or not. Today, it seemed that she’d put some genuine effort into actually calculating her own finances for the day, which Yuuki found admirable.

“I’ll take this one... and this one too.”

“Just those?”

“Gotta be responsible with money!”

Every month, their father sent them a hefty sum of money that was meant to cover their daily expenses, but also included their monthly allowance. Yuuki knew that Mina tended to blow it all away relatively quickly, so he made a habit of giving her access to it in smaller increments.

The whole point of Yuuki’s solution was so that there wouldn’t be a problem if she ever decided to up her spending for some random purchase, and this only made her proclaimed desire to be more “responsible” that much more bizarre.

“You getting anything, Yukkie?” Mina asked while stuffing the goods she’d bought into her bag. There wasn’t anything in particular that Yuuki had his eyes on, so they headed back out to the west side of the station.

“Should we get some lunch boxes for dinner?”

“Beef bowl!” Mina interrupted, pointing at the signboard of a gyudon restaurant on the side of the road.

Her suggestion was sudden, but welcome nonetheless. Yuuki dutifully went and procured them two delicious bowls that were brimming with rice, beef, onions, and topped with a sunny-side-up egg. As it happens, fate brought him into contact with an unexpected acquaintance just as he was headed toward the station's exit on their journey home.

"Whaaa—? But you were the one that brought it up first, Sis."

"Hmm? I have no idea what you're talking about~"

Two girls exited a nearby department store, shopping bags in hand. Their argumentative voices sounded awfully familiar to Yuuki, so he casually glanced to the side and accidentally made eye contact with one of them.

"Ah..."

"Oh..."

They both froze in place, their mouths half-open in surprise.

"Y-Yuuki?" asked the girl.

Yuuki's doubts were completely dispelled as the girl's voice definitely belonged to someone he knew. He hadn't recognized her immediately since he'd only ever seen her in her school uniform, and her casual clothes gave off a much different vibe.

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“Yo,” he raised his hand to greet her after a brief pause.

The woman accompanying his seatmate approached him and said, “Oh my, oh my, oh my! And who might you be? Yui’s acquaintance?”

“H-He’s a classmate of mine, Maki,” Yui answered with a sour expression.

“Hmm! I see,” Maki teased, pushing Yui further to the side so that she could get an even better look at Yuuki. “So I guess you’re that Yuuki Narito guy I’ve heard so much about!”

“Did you now?” asked Yuuki, perplexed. Why was a complete stranger he’d never met calling him by his full name like that?

“I’m Maki, Yui’s older sister. It’s nice to meet you,” she introduced herself with a relaxed bow. Yuuki noticed a slight sweet scent coming from her long, silky-brown hair.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” he responded hesitantly and followed suit with a bow of his own.

Maki then raised her head and began scrutinizing him from head to toe, as if she was assessing him on some mysterious scale known only to her. Yuuki boldly did the same, though on a much smaller scale. He could definitely tell that she and Yui were related. They did have very different proportions, but their faces very much resembled one another. Maki was just a bit more plump and a bit taller than Yui. Plus, she gave off the unmistakable aura of a collected adult.

Despite that, she somehow still managed to look super casual, and she appeared to always have a little smile on her face. Yuuki got the impression that she was a caring and gentle person, especially due to her relaxed eyes and calm voice. This almost angelic, calm aura was in stark contrast to Yui’s incredibly angry disposition today.

“You should’ve dressed up more if you were gonna meet him,” Maki teased.

“Shuddap.”

Yui wore a pair of jeans, a white shirt, and a pair of sneakers. Her sister, however, was dressed more elegantly, wearing a thin blue dress with heels. They might be sisters, but their differences extended way beyond their personalities, seemingly extending right down to their fashion sense.

Wonder why Yui looks so on edge, Yuuki thought before speaking, “You looked cute in that photo the other day.”

“H-Huh?! Wh-Why are you mentioning *that* now of all things?!”

“No makeup today?”

“Wh-What?! It’s not my job to impress you all the time!”

“I think you look fine without it too,” he retorted.

Yui’s face twisted in rage, and she turned beet red following Yuuki’s unintentional compliments. She was just about to get in his face and give him a good talking to when she suddenly stopped in her tracks. She became keenly aware of the broad grin Maki wore next to her, and the knowing way in which her sister nodded to herself was particularly worrying.

“Heh-heh,” Maki smirked.

“Wh-What even is that face you’re making?” Yui demanded.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” came the smug, teasing reply.

“Your creepiness level’s off the charts.”

“Just you wait ‘til we’re back home,” Maki said in a surprisingly harsh tone, though her smile didn’t waver a bit.

Guess this is her sister’s mischievous side showing. She did send those messages from Yui’s phone, after all... Yuuki thought. *Still, they look like they get along well.*

“So Narito—oh, actually! Should I call you Yuuki, maybe?” Maki asked, her attention once again focused on Yuuki.

“Whatever makes you comfortable.”

“You can call me Maki too, if you want. Or maybe you’d prefer calling me your big sis?”

Yuuki was completely unbothered about how Maki chose to address him; he was more preoccupied with why Yui kept silently staring at the two of them. Maki seemed unconcerned, though, and kept asking Yuuki question after question.

“So tell me, Yuuki, are you a tit man or an ass man?” she asked nonchalantly.

“Sorry?” he said, understandably stumped by Maki’s baffling question.

It seemed that Yui had finally lost her patience, and she inserted herself between Maki and Yuuki, pushing her sister’s face away.

“You heard nothing, Yuuki!” Yui said. “We were just going, actually!”

“S-Stop it, Yui! What would people think if they saw you pushing your older sister around like this?”

“Just be glad that I don’t have my Buster Rifle equipped.”

“Your what-now? Quit screwing around, Yui! We’ve gotta *at least* confirm his fetishes and—”

“H-Hey, shut it! Could you *be* any louder?!” Yui exclaimed. While the two sisters both looked elegant and delicate at first glance, the fact of the matter was that they were now loudly stirring up trouble and standing out. And not in a good way.

I guess that’s just how they always are, Yuuki pondered as Maki shot him yet another smile.

“There’s no reason to keep chatting in front of the store like this,” said Maki. “How about we go to a coffee shop together?”

“S-Sis, what are you sayi—gah!” Yui grunted as Maki shoved her away. It seemed that the answer was *always* violence when it came to these two.

“Let’s go, shall we?” Maki said, already turning on her way to the coffee shop. Just then, she noticed someone hiding behind Yuuki’s back. “Oh. And you are?” she inquired, stooping over to Mina.

Mina came out of hiding and stared defiantly up at Maki before she finally found her voice. “I-I’m...Yukkie’s girlfriend!” she shouted, her eyes glued shut, and her voice trembling.

Everyone froze simultaneously, and Mina returned to her hiding place behind Yuuki. The Takatsuki duo were both in shock, staring blankly as they clearly tried to process what they’d just heard.

The silence stretched on for quite a while before Mina grabbed Yuuki’s sleeve and pulled him away.

“Guess I’ll see you later,” Yuuki said with a wave, staggering as he was dragged along by his sister.

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Yuuki and Mina eventually returned home. Mina hadn’t uttered a single word after what she’d said to Maki, and her muteness remained even after they entered the living room and put away their belongings. She guiltily sat down on the carpet and waited for Yuuki to scold her for what she’d done. She pressed her arms tightly against herself and shamefully drooped her head. She looked like a puppy who’d just knocked over a potted plant.

“You realize you’re contradicting yourself, right? How can you constantly harass me about getting a girlfriend, but then girlfriend-block me like that in public?”

“But... But, I thought that, maybe, you needed my help,” Mina said, looking up at Yuuki with upturned eyes. It seemed that even she couldn’t come up with a satisfactory explanation.

“There were other ways to handle that situation.”

“But I thought those girls were hitting on you.”

“You’re too young to even know what that means. And anyway, we both know that’s not the case. You read too much manga.”

“I thought I should protect you from them by saying I was your girlfriend,” she meekly explained.

Yuuki failed to see what exactly she was trying to accomplish, but he believed she did sound sincere about wanting to help him out, at the very least. He still had a thing or two that he wanted to make absolutely clear to her, but since she had no ill intentions, he chose to leave it at that for now.

He sighed and felt his body grow weak. “I kinda get what you were going for,” he said as he approached her and sat down right next to her. “Thank you for looking out for me, Mina.”

“You can’t sit cross-legged, okay? It’s bad manners!” Mina joked as Yuuki began to pat her head. The frown on her face instantly melted away and was replaced by a bright smile. “Yukkie—hic! I love you. Hic! I wuv you shooo much... Hic!” she mustered between a slew of sobs and hiccups.

“Wonder if they snuck liquor into your food or something.”

“Completely wasted over here!” she said before laying down and hugging Yuuki from the side.

“Alright, alright, I get it. Good God, weren’t you the one who told me not to obsess over my little sister?”

“Ah! It seems that I had forgotten. Please forgive my insolence,” she apologized, imitating someone she saw on TV. She scampered away from Yuuki in a hurry with a serious expression and stood facing him straight as a board. It was the first thing she had done all day that resembled her normal behavior, and Yuuki couldn’t help but be relieved.

“You’ve been acting weird all day. What’s wrong?” he asked.

“What do you mean? I’m the same as I’ve always been.”

“As if. Should I list everything unusual about you today? You got all ready to go out by yourself, for starters. Very unusual. You acted a lot more responsible and confident, as well, not to mention how you’ve been insisting on doing more of the housework lately, too... Something is definitely up.”

“W-Well, you looked pretty desperate to hang out with me today!” she said, looking visibly unhappy and averting her eyes, “But I’ll have you know that I would’ve been fine all on my own!” she proclaimed. Yuuki had to fight the urge to roll his eyes.

“Yeah right,” he retorted sarcastically.

It appeared that Mina somehow had an entirely different perspective than he did. From where he stood, she looked like she’d have fainted at the mere sight of that crowd walking around back at the train station. Still, he did understand where Mina was coming from, despite the fact that this was all still a rather odd change of heart for her.

“I think you should focus on making actual friends, Mina,” he finally said. “Then you can go and hang out in town as much as you like.”

“How dare you insult me like this. I would highly recommend that you stop clinging to your baby sister and find yourself a proper companion!” she passionately argued, turning the accusation back around on him. “You talk the talk, but you do not walk the walk. Where is your girlfriend? How I see it is that *I’m* the only one keeping you company since you’re all lonely and single!” she declared, folding her arms arrogantly as she looked down on Yuuki.

Her combative attitude and strange manner of speech came completely out of the blue, and Yuuki was briefly stunned into a confused silence. Mina seized the opportunity to continue her diatribe.

“So if you want me to make a friend, then I demand that you get a girlfriend first, understand?”

“You promise you’ll make a friend if I get myself a girlfriend?”

“Yes! For realzies!” she exclaimed, melting back into her real tone of voice and nodding.

The last time this topic came up, Yuuki was certain that Mina had been joking, or half-joking at the very least. It was clear now that she was dead serious this time around.

A girlfriend, huh? Yuuki said to himself, contemplating what he had just gotten himself into.

Chapter Twelve

Star Actress Yui

The next morning, Yuuki had arrived at school a bit earlier than usual. He sat down at his desk and decided to use the little extra time he had to conduct some research on the internet. Using his phone, he combined baffling searches such as “How to get my obsessive little sister off of me?” with interesting keywords such as “Compromise.” The loud thud of a bag dropping on the desk next to his interrupted his research.

He glanced to the side to see Yui angrily going through the motions of getting ready for class. Yuuki realized it didn’t bode well for him to see her so displeased first thing in the morning.

She pulled her chair back, grinding it loudly across the floor as she did. She overdid it just a bit, however, and the chair would have tipped over and clattered to the ground had she not caught it in a panic.

What exactly is she doing? Yuuki pondered to himself.

Yui cleared her throat nonchalantly and sat down at her desk as though nothing had happened, but the slight blush on her face told a different story. She turned to give Yuuki an accusatory glare, even though he was a mere spectator.

“What?” she said, her tone harsh. The silence stretched on for a moment before she spoke up again, “Yesterday was a lot of fun.”

It had slipped Yuuki’s mind that he’d met her at the station just yesterday. He’d been so preoccupied with Mina that he’d completely forgotten that he owed Yui an explanation as well.

“Your girlfriend is really cute,” Yui continued, sounding a bit more chipper than a few seconds prior. “I thought you told me you didn’t have one.”

“You got it all wrong. That was my little sister.”

“Wha—?! Y-Your...” Her voice trailed off, and she let out a peculiar cry. “L-Little sister? Well, she sure looked like she thought of you as more than just an older brother,” she continued stiffly.

“Doesn’t matter, she’s still my biological sister.”

“I-I have heard certain stories of people... doing *that* with their siblings, and,” she stumbled over her words and trailed off once again.

“I think you’re a little confused. She only said that because she thought you were two random strangers harassing me. She just wanted you to back off for my sake.”

“Ohh, so that’s what that was. Wow. I’m so sorry about how my sister acted.”

“It wasn’t just her.”

“Are you calling me a thirsty ho?!” Yui stood up in protest, her chair once again scraping across the already worn classroom floor. She then let out a disgruntled sigh before sitting down again.

Yuuki figured that was the end of that, but Yui apparently had other plans. She kept shooting him restless glances until she couldn’t help it anymore.

“So you went on a date with your cute little sister? That sounds really, really nice,” she said.

Not only was Yui being awfully persistent about the matter, but her choice of words was also bothering Yuuki. His day out with Mina was less of a date, and more akin to a babysitting mission.

“Don’t know about all that ‘cute’ stuff. She’s been going through a rebellious phase lately,” he grumbled. He then went on to explain to Yui about Mina’s recent odd behavior and how he was at a genuine loss on how to deal with her. Yui listened attentively, then nodded in admiration, as though she’d just realized something.

“Hmm, I see. It’s kinda refreshing seeing you like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Y’know, like, seeing you mad at someone. You barely show any emotion. And this all comes from a good place since you care so much about your sister! It’s pretty heartwarming.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m actually *mad* or anything. I just don’t know what to do with her sometimes. She told me that she’ll only make friends at school if I get myself a girlfriend. Can you believe it?” he complained, folding his arms as he pondered on what to do.

“Hmm~? A girlfriend, huh? Hehe, I see,” she tittered as she glanced at Yuuki. “Funny you mention it, because my sister has been nagging me to get a boyfriend too...”

“Damn, guess we both got it rough.”

“Y-Yeah,” Yui responded as the conversation came to a sudden halt. She then busied herself with sorting the contents of her bag and the inside of her

desk. Eventually, she stopped what she was doing midway, turned toward Yuuki, and declared that she had an idea.

"Let's hear it," Yuuki said.

"Come closer," she instructed, looking around inconspicuously to ensure that the coast was clear before leaning in closer to Yuuki, cupping his ear with her hand, and whispering, "How about I pretend to be your girlfriend?" She chuckled cutely and leaned back away from him.

"What?" Yui's suggestion was so abrupt, so completely inconceivable, that he just had to make sure he heard her correctly.

"What do you mean 'what'? I can be your fake girlfriend in front of your sister."

"... Yeah, let's not."

"But why not? It's a great idea! And, *and* it'll trick your little sister into netting herself some friends too!"

"I get that, but I think that may be a bit too much. And what do you even get out of it?" he asked. *She must be planning something.* As he'd suspected, Yui was clearly shaken by his question.

"U-Uh, Well, I'm, uh, just so worried about Mina! That's all! If she's anything like you, then she must definitely struggle with making new friends!"

"Hey, I have *two* people in my contacts list, for the record. Mina has zero. No joke."

"You sound way too proud of a measly two contacts. I didn't exactly have high hopes, but I had no idea the situation was *this* bad. I'm not one of those two contacts, am I? Oh, actually, hmm... Are you possibly getting cold feet? Is it because you want me to be your girlfriend for real? Pretend just ain't enough for you?" she asked, finishing off with a deadly smile.

I knew she was up to something.

Mina was a handful, but Yui was certainly giving her a run for her money. Yuuki started to suspect that she might have more screws loose than he'd thought. There was no way a normal person would genuinely suggest being someone else's fake lover, right?

This sounds like something out of a bad anime. But I guess I can't just shut her down like that. It would be too cruel.

"You're so helpless, Yui."

"What's with the condescending tone?"

"I get it, don't you worry. We'll do as you say."

“Why do you sound like *you’re* the one indulging a spoiled brat?”

“Nah, you’re just imagining things. Thank you, Yui. You’re so kind and caring.”

“Wha—? Keep this up. See what happens,” Yui said menacingly.

Yuuki noticed that she was now holding the stone he’d given her as if it was a weapon. Things were about to get ugly, but Yuuki had an ace up his sleeve. All bad blood was subdued courtesy of his all-forgiving smile. This technique took a lot out of Yuuki, but its effects were immediate, as evidenced by Yui’s peculiar expression that was a mix of happiness and frustration.

“That settles it then!” Yui exclaimed joyfully, marking an end to that whole episode.

It’s gonna be tough handling both of these girls at the same time, Yuuki pondered. *Now that we’re “dating,” I’m particularly worried about what this new little sister of mine will do in public. But she did say this was all for Mina, right?* His thoughts quickly turned to self-assurance and pragmatism. *Besides, this is killing two birds with one stone, isn’t it?*

When classes had finished, Yui suggested striking while the iron was hot and formally introducing her to Mina at Yuuki’s apartment. The pair set some ground rules, which included deciding that the farce would only be in effect in front of Mina. As such, they left the school separately and only met up again in front of a convenience store nearby.

“S-Sorry to keep you waiting,” Yui said. She had her hand on her chest and looked to be having trouble breathing.

“What’s wrong?” Yuuki inquired.

“J-Just a little nervous,” she answered quietly.

Wonder where all that enthusiasm went, Yuuki thought. She had looked rather excited when she first came up with the idea, but he supposed she was now second-guessing herself now that they were actually going to go through with it. *Turns out she’s the one with cold feet, after all.* Yuuki felt that her change in attitude was so severe that it was possible that she also suffered from some kind of multiple personality disorder. *Poor girl.*

Yuuki grabbed her arm in a strange attempt to calm her down. “Here,” he said, “I’ll give you a handshake.”

“O-Oh, thank y—wait! Why a handshake of all things?!” she protested, violently jerking her arm away. Her face began to turn red as she stood there, awkwardly holding her own arm.

“My bad. But we’ll probably have to get used to it if we’re going to pretend that we’re a couple.”

“R-Right,” Yui faltered, stumbling over her words. Though she didn’t seem entirely convinced, she still brought her arm down and placed her hand in his. Yuuki could feel her whole arm twitch slightly and become stiff soon after. However, she eventually loosened up and squeezed his hand.

Her hands are so smooth and soft, he thought to himself. “You have beautiful hands.”

“I-I do? W-Well, uh, your fingers are so long and slim... They’re pretty attractive.”

“You think so?” he asked as he looked down at his hand. Yuuki reverted his attention back to Yui pretty quickly, since she looked rather suspicious. She had the faintest traces of a smile on her slightly blushed face, and her eyes were wandering around frantically.

“Whoa, you’re totally nailing this ‘flustered girlfriend on her first date’ act. You might be a natural.”

“O-Of course! V-Very convincing act, right?!”

“Yeah, that weird smile is a great touch.”

“I-I know! I’m a talented actress! You can call me Yui Jolie,” she boldly claimed.

Yuuki had been of the mind that anyone would have been able to see through their ruse, but Yui’s hidden talents roused some hope within him; perhaps it’d work surprisingly well in the end.

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“Welcome home, Master Yukkie!” Mina exclaimed.

Prior to his arrival, Mina had texted Yuuki instructing him to ring the intercom instead of simply unlocking the door himself. He was bewildered, but did as she said all the same. He didn’t know what to expect, but it certainly wasn’t Mina jumping at the doorway dressed in a bizarre white maid cap and matching white apron.

“I’m home,” Yuuki responded, taking a step to the side to reveal Yui, who stood right behind him.

As soon as Mina realized that he’d brought a guest, she opted for a hasty retreat. She turned her back to them and ran off deeper into the apartment, her brisk footsteps echoing from within.

Yuuki and his faux girlfriend were exposed to the sight of Mina's usual skimpy outfit. This time, she wore nothing but a T-shirt and a pair of panties, and her apron had been short enough to only barely cover her panties from the front.

"What in the world is she wearing?!" shouted Yui. "Why doesn't she have anything to cover her underwear?!" Yui was so surprised that she almost choked on her breath at the sight of Mina's getup.

"She's wearing a T-shirt at least. That's something."

"You can't be serious! Does she always prance around the house naked like that?!" Yui stared at Yuuki with palpable disgust. Her death glare was so intense that she'd probably come to the conclusion that Yuuki forced his sister to talk and dress in that lewd way.

"I guess maids are pretty popular these days. Especially the ones that do the house chores and whatever," Yuuki explained, doing his best to clear any strange misunderstandings Yui might've had.

Despite his best efforts, Yui continued to cast dubious glances at him. He tried not to think about it too hard as he showed her into the apartment and the living room proper. Mina, however, was nowhere to be found. Yuuki figured that she must've been really surprised by Yui's sudden appearance, seeing as he didn't tell her ahead of time.

"Give me a moment," he said to Yui, urging her to sit on the sofa for the time being while he searched for Mina.

When he reached Mina's room Yuuki noticed that her door was slightly ajar, along with a pair of curious eyes peeking through the gap. Their eyes met, and Mina immediately tried slamming the door shut. Her effort was wasted, as Yuuki was both faster and stronger than her; he was able to grab onto the knob and force the door open without any issues. As soon as he entered the room, Mina hurled herself at the door and leaned her back against it.

"Phew," she heaved a sigh of relief, clearly hoping that nobody else would enter.

"Why did you try closing the door?" Yuuki asked. He noticed that she'd taken off the apron and was now wearing a pair of shorts along with her T-shirt. "So you *can* wear clothes like a normal person."

"Hey! I'm not some kind of caveman!" she retorted.

"You sure about that?" he asked sarcastically. "We have a guest over. Come on out and say hello."

Mina beckoned Yuuki over, so he dutifully crouched down to her level. She whispered softly in his ear, “Yukkie, you can’t just do that.”

“Do what?”

“Pay someone money to be your girlfriend.”

“It’s not a rental service. I’m not paying her anything.”

“Smells like a scam to me.”

“I’m telling you, it isn’t. That girl is my... girlfriend.”

“Your whaaa—?!” Mina yelped in confusion, wide-eyed and slack-jawed. The shock sent her reeling backwards, and she nearly lost her footing before dramatically freezing in place.

Is it really that surprising? Yuuki thought.

“Y-Your girlfriend?! Who exactly is your...” Her voice trailed off.

“You’ve already seen her. Remember that selfie you saw the other day?”

“The selfie? Hmm,” Mina pondered. She slowly opened her door back up and snuck closer to the living room to get a good look at their unexpected guest. “Ah! Is this Yui, maybe?”

Yuuki wondered if it had taken Mina so long to notice because Yui had been wearing such heavy makeup in the selfie, and because the impression she was giving off now was quite different.

“Oh no... it’s Yui in the flesh. What do I do?” she said flustered.

Yui turned to look at Mina with a forced smile and waved her hand. Mina had intended to be super stealthy, but apparently Yui could clearly see everything from where she sat, making the situation significantly more awkward for her.

“Oh crap! She just waved at me!” Mina cried.

“Yeah, yeah. Now let’s go introduce you to her,” Yuuki said, pushing her from behind. Mina, however, refused to move and braced her legs, so Yuuki ended up grabbing her arm and forcibly dragging her along.

“Are you sure she doesn’t bite?” Mina managed to whisper that terrified question into Yuuki’s ear despite standing right in front of him.

“Stay on your toes, soldier. She’s an unpredictable one,” Yuuki responded.

“I can hear everything, F-Y-I,” Yui interjected, glaring daggers at Yuuki. Her angry expression vanished almost instantly once she turned to look at Mina. Yui flashed a smile at Mina and spoke to her in a soft tone, dragging out her vowels all the while, “I won’t hurt you, see?”

Yuuki had the foresight to warn Yui in advance about how shy Mina could be around strangers, but it appeared that Mina's behavior was no obstacle to Yui. She spoke to his sister in a coaxing, gentle manner that he'd never heard her use before, and she was so smiley that it was borderline creepy.

"You can think of me as a loving older sister! Your caring older sister Yui would never do anything to harm you," she continued, still elongating her vowels and almost sounding like she was trying to convince herself more than Mina.

Wonder if she gets bullied by her own older sister or something, Yuuki thought to himself.

Mina was clearly still nervous, and her eyes were wandering around the room in an effort to avoid eye contact. "Um!" I h-have a question!" she finally declared with determination, seemingly having made her mind up and staring Yui directly in the eyes.

"Anything!" Yui responded.

"What color panties are you wearing right now?"

"... What did you just say to me?" Yui asked, the soft expression she had a moment ago now nowhere to be seen.

Mina awkwardly turned to face her brother and again whispered meekly into his ear, "I wanted to break the ice, but I think I messed it up, Yukkie."

"What exactly were you thinking, Mina? And anyway, she's probably wearing those white panties. With the ribbon."

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear when I warned you about sexual harassment," Yui interjected once more. She was glaring at Yuuki like she was about to put some sort of vicious curse on him.

"I'm sorry on behalf of Yukkie. He says inappropriate things sometimes," Mina said, inserting herself between the two of them and bowing her head apologetically.

"Throwing me under the bus the first chance you get, huh?"

"So does he pay you by the hour? Or is this a dare you were forced to do?" Mina abruptly inquired.

"Now you're just doing it on purpose. I'll say it again: Yui is my girlfriend," Yuuki asserted.

"Umm, yeah, I'm Yui Takatsuki, and I'm Yuuki's girlfriend. It's nice to meet you."

“Since when have you guys been a couple?” Mina asked in a puzzled tone, alternatively looking at her brother and Yui.

“Uhh... since today, I guess?” Yuuki responded.

“Today?! Which one of you confessed first then?”

“Well...” Yuuki faltered, turning to Yui for help.

“He was the one who confessed to me,” Yui answered confidently without a moment’s delay. Since this was all one big lie anyway, Yuuki didn’t particularly sweat the details. However, he did notice that Yui seemed particularly set on that specific part of their fake relationship.

“It was Yukkie who confessed? Really? Hmm. Oh, oh! Does this have something to do with those texts you guys were sending each other the other day?!”

“Nope,” Yuuki promptly refuted. He figured that Mina wouldn’t let him hear the end of it if she thought that her questionable texts were the catalyst for their brand-new relationship. Ultimately, he decided on denying it altogether, “Oh actually, speaking of those messages—”

“Th-Those texts had nothing to do with it! Nothing at all!” Yui suddenly interrupted. Yuuki wondered why her face was flushed, or why she had gotten so worked up about it. After all, those texts had actually been just between their sisters.

“So I guess Yukkie really did end up confessing, huh? How’d you break it to her?” Mina asked yet another dreadful question. Yuuki turned to Yui for help a second time. However, it appeared that he’d used up all of his lifelines, and Yui looked away from him.

Guess I’m on my own, he thought before saying, “I went up to her and said something along the lines of: ‘I love you, Yui. Please go out with me.’”

Out of the corner of his eye, Yuuki saw Yui do some esoteric gesture involving her chin and her hand. Clearly she was giving him some sort of sign, but he couldn’t understand what it meant. Unfortunately, the pair had failed to get their stories straight prior to meeting Mina.

“Oooh! And she accepted your confession right away?” Mina continued.

“Y-Yeah... He was pretty persistent, and eventually led to me giving in to his enthusiasm,“ Yui explained.

Yuuki didn’t exactly appreciate the fact she kept adding peculiar details about how exactly it happened. He suspected that she thought it made the

story sound more believable, but whatever the case was, he was about to lay down the truth for Mina.

"So yeah. That's how we ended up as a couple. I kept my part of the deal. Now it's your turn. Make some friends, Mina," he said.

"Hmm. I dunno if I believe it."

"What's so hard to believe?"

"Talk is cheap, Yukkie. I need to know if she's worthy of being your girlfriend in terms of soul, skill, and body. So I'll be testing her now," Mina explained, then asked them to follow her. She never once looked at Yui when saying that, so Yuuki assumed that she still felt uncomfortable having a conversation with Yui.

"Sounds fun!" Yui exclaimed. She sounded willing, as opposed to a certain unamused Yuuki. Yui was in such a great mood, in fact, that she'd already followed Mina in a brisk trot before Yuuki had managed to register what was going on.

Where is she gonna lead us to? Yuuki wondered as he caught up with them. They had arrived in front of Mina's room, and Mina flung open the door and pointed inside.

"I will test the purity of your heart first. In other words, I want to make sure there is no underlying darkness looming deep within your soul. *Soyeahpleasecleanmyroomthanks*," Mina said.

Yuuki couldn't for the life of him understand how cleaning her room was a good purity test. It had been a while since Yuuki had properly been in Mina's room, and he was unpleasantly surprised by the amount of clutter and junk scattered about. There were dirty tissues everywhere, leftover candy dispersed atop the desk, some food scraps on the carpet, not to mention issues of manga and random magazines tossed onto every available surface. It was more mess than room at this point. Mina was obviously just trying to trick Yui into tidying up her room for her.

"You think you're up for the task? Hehe," Mina chuckled with her chest puffed out, apparently proud of her unclean room.

"This is nothing compared to my sister's room," Yui nonchalantly revealed, not showing even a hint of surprise while she looked around the space.

"Seriously?" Yuuki questioned, just as taken aback as his sister was.

"Yup. I just have to clean it, right?" Yui got to cleaning without so much as waiting for a response. Yuuki was impressed by how fast she was able to

stuff all the garbage into a big plastic bag that Mina had so helpfully provided. “It’s best to tidy up books and such before we start to vacuum.”

It was apparent that she was used to cleaning, and before long, she had collected all the trash and piled up all the manga and magazines in one place. She noticed that she missed one that had been tucked under the table and squatted down to retrieve it.

“Oh, is that the *The Fission Quintuplets*? Are you into it, Mina?” Yui inquired.

“Y-Yeah, so?” Mina responded.

“Me too! I didn’t know the latest volume dropped!” Yui said excitedly.

Mina had just bought this volume yesterday. According to her, it was one of her favorites. She’d spoken very passionately about it on their way home yesterday, but since Yuuki hadn’t read it himself, all he could do was just nod along to whatever she said.

Mina was extremely timid by nature, but that often got thrown right out the window once she found someone she could chat about her hobbies with. Yui also remained engaged in the conversation, keeping true to her self-proclaimed title as the kind and caring older sister. They were having tons of fun as their lively discussion continued, so much so that the indifferent Yuuki himself wanted to take part in the action.

“So what’s it about?” he asked.

“Some guy wakes up one day to find that his little sister has split into five different people! I still haven’t finished it, but it’s pretty fun so far!” Yui explained.

“Very unrealistic. How can one brother take care of five rascals? Poor guy would die from exhaustion.”

“Hey, what’re you lookin’ at me for?!” Mina protested, whacking her brother on his shoulders with both hands.

Yuuki delved into deep thought for a moment and wondered what would become of him if that same blow was multiplied fivefold. *I’d probably be plunged into the wall and end up severely and irreparably injured,* he concluded.

“Don’t knock it ‘til you try it, Yukkie!” Mina admonished. She plucked a volume from the bookshelf and thrust it at Yuuki.

“Aww, I want to read one too. Can I?” Yui asked, pointing at the volume in her hand.

“Sure can! I’ll read it with you!” Mina happily agreed as they both took a seat on a cushion to read the latest volume together. “You start with that first volume, okay, Yukkie?”

Yuuki did as he was told and sat down to read the manga. They had long forgotten about cleaning Mina’s room and became immersed in a good reading session, as if they had just formed an impromptu manga reading club.

“Now then,” Mina declared after a while, slapping her manga volume shut, “let’s move on to the next test. Chosen One, now that I know your soul is pure, I need to ensure that your skills are honed. And by skills, I of course mean... cooking!” It looked as though she’d gotten so engrossed in reading that she’d totally forgotten about the trials that she’d meant to put Yui through. And so everybody returned to the living room again.

Mina concluded that anyone who could enjoy manga must possess a pure soul, bringing that portion of the test to an end. Besides, it appeared that bonding over manga worked surprisingly well as an ice-breaker; Mina was now able to look Yui in the face and speak to her directly.

“Right this way!” Mina continued, leading both Yuuki and Yui into the kitchen. Yuuki looked around the counter and found a plastic container of frozen rice in the process of defrosting. Next to it was a bowl with a number of eggs scattered around.

“Is ‘pigsty’ the theme of the day or something?” Yuuki asked upon witnessing the bizarre state of the kitchen.

“I was getting ready to whip up some omelet rice for you, Yukkie,” Mina answered. Her cooking repertoire was lacking, to say the least. Regardless of her prior plans, she proceeded to urge Yui to begin cooking using the pre-prepared ingredients.

“So you’re asking me to make us some omelet rice?” Yui asked.

“Yup! If that’s not too *complicated* for you, that is. Hehe,” Mina giggled.

“I think I’ll be fine,” Yui noted as she stood in the middle of the kitchen, examining the stove, frying pans, and so on. “Man, this is nothing like my kitchen.”

“No excuses allowed!” Mina declared with a chuckle, looking strangely confident.

“Can I use whatever is in the fridge?”

“Sure you can,” Mina responded. Her cynical tone clearly indicated that she was skeptical about the necessity of additional ingredients. It was just omelet rice, after all. Still, she folded her arms and judged Yui from behind her stern expression.

The rhythmic sound of the knife chopping away against the chopping board rang throughout the room shortly after, accompanied by the sizzling of cracked eggs thrown into the pan. The appetizing aroma of fried rice soon filled the kitchen, as well.

Yuuki and Mina sat around the table, mesmerized by Yui’s practiced motions. She looked dauntless when she flipped the contents of the pan, as if she’d done it countless times before. She was giving off a completely different impression than she did at school.

They must work her hard back at her home, Yuuki contemplated. He suspected that this was one of the reasons behind the negative aspects in her personality. He didn’t get much of a chance to go down this perilous train of thought, though, as the omelet rice was served right in front of him.

The dish looked exquisite, the steamy omelet adorned with a ketchup heart on top.

“I’m a pretty picky eater, just so you know,” Mina said rather too late. She carefully examined the dish from all sides and licked her lips in anticipation.

“No need to hold back! Dig right in!” Yui encouraged them with a smile from her spot right beside the siblings.

Mina scooped up a spoonful from the side, sniffing it cautiously. The smell must have convinced her, and she stuffed the whole thing into her mouth.

“It’s deli—” Mina clapped her palm to her mouth before she could finish the sentence. She then quietly chewed the food, swallowed it, and continued, “It’s okay. I guess.”

“Nice recovery, Mina. Very believable,” Yuuki quipped, impatiently snatching the spoon from his sister and taking his own bite of the dish.

Yuuki remembered the one Mina had made for him a few days ago that consisted only of eggs and plain rice and was drowned in ketchup. He was truly thankful that Yui’s dish utilized other ingredients such as onions and leftover sausages she’d found in the fridge. The omelet was cooked to perfection, looking soft and fluffy on the outside and melting in his mouth.

“This is amazing. I never expected it to taste so different from Mina’s,” Yuuki praised Yui without hesitation. Yui, for her part, looked quite happy that she impressed him and proudly held her head high.

“Of course it is! I get forced t—I mean, I cook all the time back home!” she quickly corrected herself.

Her strange slip up bothered Yuuki a bit, but as was typical for him, he chose not to dwell on it too much. What was important to him was that she was a proficient cook, just as the lunch box she’d given him a few days prior had suggested.

“Yeah, it tastes totally different than the one I made..." Mina marveled, whispering to herself after she’d taken the spoon back from Yuuki and eaten another bite.

“Don’t worry too much about it, Mina. It makes sense that’s the case, right? You haven’t been cooking as long as Yui has, after all,” Yuuki tried to reassure his seemingly dejected sister.

“I didn’t expect Yui to be such an omelet rice expert."

“Well, she doesn’t just make that. Do you remember those cookies we had the other day? Yui baked those, too.”

“Wha—? So your seatmate was Yui all along?”

“Yes.”

“Ye gods! Why haven’t ya told me of this before?!” she shouted, punching Yuuki’s shoulder, then darting up from her chair. She turned to Yui and gave her an excessively deep bow, “Your cookies were... rather delectable.”

“Aww, you think so? Glad you liked ‘em!”

“I shan’t forget their impeccable taste for aeons to come,” Mina proclaimed, cuddling closer to Yui. It was her own overblown way of telling Yui to make her some more.

“Uhh, we don’t have the ingredients for them back home right now, but I promise to make you more whenever I get my hands on them again!”

“Promise? Let’s goooo! Woo-hoo!” Mina celebrated, throwing her arms up in the air. Before she knew it, it appeared she had no choice but to accept that Yui had passed her “tests” with flying colors.

“So you done now, Mina?” Yuuki inquired.

“No, this promise has nothing to do with the test,” Mina backpedaled as she put some distance between Yui and herself. She was surprisingly persistent about this matter, folding her arms once again and having a

serious face plastered on her face. “The last test is about your body. I think it’s pretty self-explanatory," her voice trailed off, and she paused dramatically. “I will check your body myself!” Her voice picked up again, and she pointed her finger at Yui.

“Wha—?” Yui gasped, bewildered.

Yui, who had remained unfazed throughout the previous tests and endured the litany of nonsense that Mina had thrown her way, was now frozen with her eyes bulging open. Mina appeared unbothered by this reaction, though, and seized the opportunity to feel around Yui’s palm.

“Whoa, it’s so smooth,” she praised.

Yui looked to Yuuki for help. Unfortunately, said help was far out of reach. Yuuki remained where he stood, moved by the fact that Mina was interacting with someone other than him without a hint of fear.

“Gah! Look at how Yukkie is judging us!” Mina exclaimed.

“Am not,” he refuted.

“Get your head outta the gutter! There’s nothing lewd happening here! Only science!” Mina valiantly declared.

She pulled Yui into her room by her hand. Yui did her best to resist, but her efforts were for naught. She was dragged out of sight as Yuuki looked on, overwhelming joy nearly bringing him to tears.

Eventually, Yuuki found the strength to move from his spot. He ambled over to the sofa and flicked on the TV. He relaxed for a short period before the girls returned to the living room. Mina wore a complicated expression, while Yui hung her head to hide her slightly flushed face. Another thing caught Yuuki’s attention; he noticed that the collar of Yui’s blouse was crooked, that her skirt was folded strangely in some places, and that her clothes in general looked somewhat disheveled.

“Waa..." Yui groaned.

“What’s wrong?” Yuuki inquired.

“I was touched..."

Yuuki had briefly wondered what they were up to when he’d heard some strange noises coming from Mina’s room, and now he had his answer. Despite this clearly scandalous revelation, Mina looked calm as ever. She made her way to the center of the living room and sat down without the slightest tinge of guilt on her face.

“I have finished my inspection. The results are...” Mina cut herself off midway, building up the tension and slowly looking at Yuuki and Yui’s

faces in succession. “*Bzzzzt,* you failed!” she finished, pursing her lips and giving a dramatic thumbs down.

Yuuki and Yui’s eyes met before Yui turned to face Mina, her lips curled up in a wry smile.

“I-I failed? What did I do wrong?” Yui questioned.

“You passed, Yui! You’re a five star SSR character without a doubt!”

“Then why did you say that I failed the—”

“You didn’t! Yukkie did!” Mina explained, vigorously pointing her finger at her brother.

“How’s that even possible? You didn’t even test me,” he said.

“Hmm, how do I explain this... Yui is just too good for you.”

She’s definitely not wrong, he said to himself. Regardless of Yui’s occasionally eccentric behavior, she was still one of the most popular and beautiful girls at school. On top of that, she was strangely good at handling household chores, much to Yuuki’s surprise. Still, he settled upon keeping these thoughts to himself, because he’d risk her blowing a fuse otherwise.

“You know, I do honestly think we might not be the best match,” Yuuki said.

“R-Really? I-I disagree, personally," Yui mumbled.

Right, she’s a fantastic actress too, I guess. That’s another thing to add to her repertoire.

As it was, Yuuki was simply nothing but another guy who happened to sit next to her. Mina—who knew nothing of Yui’s reputation—objected and shook her head in disagreement.

“How should I put it... Like, somehow I can sense how much Yui loves you, Yukkie. But I don’t get the same feeling from you at all.”

“Y-You can sense that?! Th-That I love him?!” Yui panicked, her face reddening, and her eyes jutting to Yuuki and back.

“Hm?” Yuuki looked back at her, confused.

“Ah, I mean, yes, I guess you can sense, uh, that,” Yui stammered.

Yuuki figured that whatever Mina was talking about was merely a product of Yui’s impeccable acting skills. Of course, Yuuki himself couldn’t sense if love was in the air or anything of the sort, but he concluded that it was probably something that women understood about one another.

“Also, you guys feel too distant to be a couple,” Mina added.

While she probably didn’t mean it in the physical sense, it was still true that Yuuki and Yui were sitting three whole seats apart. Yuuki himself

wasn't exactly well-versed in how close couples should be sitting, but he still didn't want to render all of Yui's efforts meaningless.

"Nah, it's all in your head," he replied, taking matters into his own hands and scooting so close to Yui that they could almost rub shoulders. "How about this?"

"How about what?" Mina asked suspiciously, inciting him to do more.

"Umm, well then," he stumbled, desperately trying to come up with another couple-type behavior. He glanced at Yui next to him, but she looked just as baffled. He realized that they were going nowhere by simply staring at each other like this, so he tried the next best thing: he wrapped both of his arms around Yui's shoulders.

"Eep!" Yui let out an odd yelp and twitched like a chill had run down her spine.

Maybe I went too far? Yuuki thought to himself. He noticed that her cheeks had turned a burning scarlet, but that ludicrous expression of hers made it difficult for him to judge if she was okay with this or not.

Her shoulders were soft to the touch, but there was something more pressing that stood out to him now that he was in such close proximity to her.

"You smell nice. Are you wearing perfume?" Yuuki questioned.

"N-No! I'm not," Yui timidly replied.

"You sure? Hm. Weird," he said, continuing to sniff her.

Mina's high-pitched shriek put an end to that uncomfortable show of intimacy between this faux couple.

"STAHP! No flirting in front of little sisters!"

"Hey, you asked for this, Mina," Yuuki said.

"I didn't ask you to turn into a gross perv!" Mina protested angrily. She then nudged her way between them, separating the two. Yuuki seemed shocked and hardly resisted. Apparently, being called an "old fart" by his little sister had done a number on him.

"What I meant was that, like, I want to know *what* you like about Yui, Yukkie," Mina explained. It was a sensible question, and one that Yuuki had expected. Unfortunately, as before, he had failed to discuss it with Yui beforehand, so he was at a loss on how to answer.

He glanced at Yui to find that she was staring directly into his eyes and blinking rapidly. Clearly, she wanted him to pick up on something, and she was silently mouthing that thing at him. Being the veteran lip reader that he

was, he was able to understand what she wanted him to say without a problem.

"I like her... *buffalo wings*!"

"My *everything*! Who are you calling a buffalo?!"

"Your everything, heh-heh," he chuckled.

"Whatchu laughing at?" Yui probed, poking his shoulder. Yuuki just kept laughing, though. "No seriously, what's so funny?! There's no joke here!"

"It's just kinda funny that you want me to love *every little thing* about you," Yuuki responded.

"Th-That's not what it is! I-It was something I thought up in the heat of the moment! You should've known that! Besides, you could've just said that you liked how cute and caring I am, smartypants!"

"Good idea. Okay, I like how cute and caring she is."

"Wow, so convincing. How about we try again, but with *actual* emotion this time? For example, how do you feel when you're with me?" Yui asked.

"Hmm. It's fun being with you... I think?"

"Good, good. What else?"

Yuuki thought for a moment before saying, "I like how you're pretty annoying?"

"*You're* pretty annoying," Yui coldly replied.

She didn't like that last one, I suppose, Yuuki pondered. The "couple" would continue their quarrel until Mina—who had been watching silently—raised her arms in the air to stop them.

"Timeout, you two! That's enough! I understand everything. You can stop now," Mina said. Yuuki wasn't sure what she meant, but was more nervous that his sister may have seen through their act.

"So it finally happened... Yukkie got himself a girlfriend. They grow up so fast," Mina added, wiping a nonexistent tear from the corner of her eye.

"Spare me the drama. Now it's your turn," Yuuki admonished.

"My turn for what?"

"Your turn to make friends," he replied, to which Mina rolled her eyes and averted her gaze. Yuuki was more than aware that she tended to be a sore loser, so he needed to make sure that she stuck to her word. "You said you'd do it 'for realzies,' remember? You can't back out now."

"S-Sure I do! Making friends is nothing. I could do it with my eyes closed!" she exclaimed, standing up.

“And where are you going?” Yuuki inquired.

“To the bathroom,” she said, leaving the living room in a hurry.

Yuuki let out a sigh of relief and smiled at Yui. “I had my doubts, but it looks like she bought it.”

“Well, you know, I think we look pretty natural, all things considered,” Yui responded.

“Yeah, all thanks to our own local Hollywood star.”

“It was a great performance, if I do say so myself!” she laughed away, clearly elated. Judging from the excitement in her voice, her mood had noticeably improved in the last few minutes.

I hope that this whole gag was enough to bring a positive change to Mina’s social life. Yuuki mulled things over in the back of his head while waiting on Mina, who didn’t appear to be returning from the bathroom anytime soon.

◆◇

Mina leaned heavily against the living room door. She could hear Yuuki and Yui’s faint laughter coming from behind it.

Yui is a good person. I know she won’t hurt Yukkie, she thought to herself. *I’m so happy for you, Bro.* She never anticipated that her brother would be able to get a girlfriend so quickly. She was undoubtedly fundamentally different from her precious older brother.

“We’re not alike. Not one bit,” Mina muttered in a fragile voice. She then closed her eyes and covered her ears in a feeble attempt to cut out the lively voices leaking through the cracks in the doorway.

Chapter Thirteen

A Date

Several days had passed since the esteemed actress Yui had graced the Narito household with her outstanding performance. Yuuki had just returned from school to find Mina sitting on the sofa fiddling with her phone. Normally if her phone was in her hands, it meant that she was playing a game with the volume at max. That wasn't the case today. She was quiet, perhaps too quiet.

Yuuki changed out of his school uniform and into his loungewear before sitting down next to Mina. In response, she scooted away from her brother and hid her phone from him.

"What's wrong?" Yuuki asked.

"I'm texting a friend. No peeking."

"Sorry, what?" he involuntarily responded before he could stop himself.

"Y-You heard me. I made a new friend," Mina said with an awkward smile.

"Have you now? Nice going. What's their name?"

"R-Rika."

"Just checking, but she isn't imaginary, right?"

"H-Hey! That's just rude!" Mina protested and angrily stormed out of the living room. She remained locked in her room for the rest of the day after that, only leaving for lunch.

Her abnormal behavior continued into the next day as well, as she returned home from school much later than Yuuki did.

"I'm gonna call my friend, so don't bother me!" Mina commanded. Again, she secluded herself in her room, now for the second day in a row.

Yuuki wondered why she didn't spend more time with her supposed friend after school if she was just going to call her immediately after returning home. Whatever the case, it seemed that it was now becoming a habit for Mina to hide herself away in her room and only foray outside for food.

"I'm so, so, *so* busy chatting with my friend. I don't even have any time to spend with you anymore, Yukkie," she grumbled as she continued to tap away at her phone.

Moreover, it appeared that her interest in being a maid and such had gone with the wind. If anything, this was good news for Yuuki, since he no longer had to worry about Mina's destructive attempts at doing chores. Still, he didn't like that she was so preoccupied with her friend that he got to spend less and less time with her.

"Oh bee tee dubs, how's Yui? Haven't seen her in a while," Mina suddenly asked with an inquiring glance.

Yui the Star was in need of a well-deserved rest, so Yuuki hadn't invited her to his apartment ever since that day. Plus, each unnecessary exposure to Mina only increased the risk of blowing their cover. There was no need for him to go out of his way to bring that dazzling actress Yui out of retirement so recklessly.

"It's the weekend tomorrow. Aren't you planning to go on a date with her?" Mina continued, leaving Yuuki at a loss. He reluctantly dug his phone out of his pocket and sent Yui a text asking her what she thought of the idea. She agreed, leaving him with an impromptu date to look forward to.

The following morning, Yuuki had gotten changed at his usual pace and was just about ready to head out. When he walked into the living room, he saw that Mina was preparing to go out herself.

I figured that was her plan, Yuuki thought. "Are you coming with, Mina?"

"Ever seen a sister accompanying her brother on a romantic date before?" she asked.

"I take it that you weren't going to follow me? Then where are you going?"

"I have plans with a *friend*," she said with a smirk.

Damn, she's full of surprises lately, Yuuki thought. Regardless, he was beginning to get anxious about the true identity of that friend of hers. "Let me ask you something for my own peace of mind: this isn't some stranger you met on the Internet, right?"

"O-Of course not! It's a friend from school!" she insisted.

Yuuki had no reason to suspect that she wasn't telling the truth. After all, he didn't believe she actually had the guts to meet up with Internet strangers. Of course, there was always the possibility that she was being stubborn and denying that she truly did want to tag along with Yuuki.

"You sure you don't want to come?" he asked once more to make extra sure.

“I’m telling you I’m going to hang out with a friend!” she argued. She made herself perfectly clear, so he refrained from pursuing the matter any further.

Maybe she got asked out on a date by a guy or something? Can’t rule out that possibility, he thought. She did say she had plans with a friend, but she didn’t specify whom, after all. Yuuki was naturally worried about her, but he figured that being over-protective would only get in the way of her independence as a person.

“Don’t you have a date to worry about, Yukkie?! Forget ‘bout me, and go already!”

“Fine. Don’t keep your friend waiting too long, okay?” he warned before leaving the apartment.

Yuuki and Yui had decided on meeting up in the plaza of a neighboring train station. Yuuki walked there on foot and ended up arriving earlier than what they’d initially agreed on.

The weather was great today; it was mostly sunny with just a few clouds floating about lazily in the sky. A refreshing breeze blew by from time to time, making the prospect of standing around basking in the sunlight that much more enjoyable. Yuuki sat on top of a brick wall and watched the cars coming and going, the swarms of people making their way in and out of the station, and the clock tower topping the station. His people-watching was interrupted when a person walked right up to him.

“Earth to Yuuki, over?” the lively voice rang. He looked up and saw his date, Yui, waving her hand in his face. “Did I keep you waiting?” she asked with a smile.

“Yes. You’re six minutes late.”

“Look here, buddy, let me lay it all out for you. You’re supposed to say something like: ‘No, Yui! I just got here myself! You’re looking lovely today, by the way!’” she explained. Her imitation of him was quite nasally, and she strung words together at a strange pace. At this point, Yuuki stood up, looked away from the clock tower, and focused on Yui instead. “... Sorry I was late. Something came up back at home, and I ended up losing track of time,” Yui explained bashfully while straightening her collar.

Today, Yui was wearing a white blouse with a bow tie neck along with a medium-length checkered skirt to match. She looked like a porcelain doll, a style worlds apart from the getup she had on the last time Yuuki had seen her at the station.

“You look great today,” he praised her.

“I always look great,” she retorted. Yuuki stood in place and eyed her up from top to bottom. This must’ve made Yui uncomfortable, as she began looking away and twiddling her thumbs. “C-Could you stop ogling me like that?”

“Oh, yeah. My bad. You’re just so cute. You look like the daughter of a rich family,” Yuuki said. Yui’s cheeks were beginning to curl up into a smile, but when she noticed Yuuki’s glances, she toned it down to a more serious expression instead.

“A-Anyways, where are you taking me today, Yuuki?” she asked.

“I dunno. Don’t have a specific place in mind,” he promptly answered.

“Then why did you tell me to come to the station specifically?” Yui asked, her eyes full of scorn as she approached him threateningly.

“Just seemed like a good place to meet up,” he responded.

“Haah, so you asked me on a date without planning anything in advance? Are you kidding? Nothing at all? You can’t be serious, man,” she complained, letting out an exaggerated sigh.

“Well, you know. I thought Mina would come with me, so...”

“What do you mean?”

“Thought all three of us could hang out today. But then Mina told me she had other plans with a friend,” Yuuki explained.

“Wha—? That’s great! She made a friend that fast? Good for her! You don’t sound all that happy about it though.”

“It’s not that. I’m just a bit worried.”

“Whoa, look at this worrywart. Y’know, I almost didn’t believe it when you told me she didn’t have any friends. She’s cute, cheerful... maybe a bit weird sometimes, but I don’t see why you have to worry.”

That wasn’t how Mina usually acted around strangers, but Yuuki understood where Yui was coming from. Mina had unexpectedly opened up to Yui, even though that was only their first time ever meeting. Even the typically immovable Yuuki was surprised.

“Well anyway, I’m used to getting led around town by Mina. So I haven’t planned anything.”

“Hmm, I see. Is there anywhere you’d like to go?”

“Not really.”

“Let’s just go back home and forget this ever happened.”

“How about we go where you want to then, Yui?” he asked.

“Huh? Me? Well, I, uh,” she stumbled after having been abruptly put on the spot like that.

Guess she’s as much at a loss for what to do as I am, despite all that big talk of hers, he thought before saying, “This is my first time asking somebody out, so I’m not really sure how these things work. But you sound pretty used to it.”

“W-Well, you could say that, haha,” she chuckled awkwardly and evaded the question. Something was off about how she was acting.

Maybe she’s just nervous, Yuuki thought. *Then again, she looks way too confident. Hmm.*

Neither of them could come up with a plan, and things were beginning to get awkward. However, Yui’s phone was here to save the day. She began browsing around for a suitable location for their date.

“H-How about we start by going to that cafe over there and—”

“Ah, I got it,” Yuuki interrupted. “There *is* one place we could go.”

“Wha—?”

“Let’s go,” he said, grabbing Yui by the hand.

Before he could pull her too far, Yui pulled her fingers away from his tight grasp. As was par for the course, she was blushing.

“W-Wait! Why did you grab my hand like it was nothing?!”

“Oops, sorry. Old habit.”

“Hmm. Well, I *am* pretending to be your girlfriend. I guess I’ll allow it if you want,” she said, some apprehension still present in her voice.

“No reason to, since Mina’s not around anyway. Oh! Wait, are you the type that easily gets lost unless somebody holds your hand?”

“No,” she replied coldly.

Ultimately, the pair kept their distance from each other as they made their way to the bus stop.

A short 20-minute bus trip later, the pair arrived at the largest park in the region. It was separated into two parts: one with sports grounds and a gym, and the other that had a playground and fresh grass covering the whole area. Additionally, there was a long boardwalk that extended along the circumference of the park, which is where Yuuki and Yui were now.

They walked away from the bustling crowds and to somewhere more peaceful. The buildings around them gradually become few and far inbetween, replaced by serene and refreshing greenery.

“Whoa, I didn’t know this was a nice date spot. It’s pretty peaceful,” Yui marveled as she looked around at their surroundings.

“Not really,” Yuui responded monotonously, “I just like to come here alone sometimes.”

“Alone? But why?” she asked.

“It’s pretty quiet. Helps me think straight when something is on my mind.”

“Wow, I’m sorry I bother you that much.”

“We didn’t come here today because of that, don’t worry. There’s this other cool thing I like about this place,” he assured her. *Hope she isn’t too pissed off that I brought her here without explaining anything.*

Yuuki took a glance at Yui and quickly realized that his worries were unwarranted. Yui looked excited, and she suddenly exclaimed joyfully, “Wow! Look, a pond! I never knew there was one here!”

She was pointing at a large, oval-shaped pond at the far end of the boardwalk. The pond had a few small streams running off it and was populated by ducks.

“Look at that bird with the red beak!” Yui exclaimed, then she put on a mock serious expression and yelled, “It’s approaching us at three times the normal speed, Captain!” She walked around the pond, excitedly observing all of the ducks floating on the water. There were very few people around them, and the only noise reaching their ears was that of the birds doing bird things.

“Let’s have lunch over there,” Yuuki suggested, pointing at a row of benches near the pond. It was Yuuki’s favourite spot; it was nice and cool with a lot of overgrown trees whose boughs provided ample natural shade.

“This place is so cool,” Yui said, still admiring her surroundings.

Yuuki sat on the bench next to Yui, then shrugged off the sling bag he’d been wearing. He rooted around inside and pulled out a plastic bag that contained some rice balls and bread. He’d picked these things up from a convenience store located near the bus stop. Yui retrieved something similar from her bag.

Yuuki was just about to bite into a rice ball, but stopped when he noticed Yui holding a one-hundred yen coin in her hand.

“Where did you get that?” he asked.

“It was on the bench,” she answered.

“You’re pretty lucky with money, huh?”

“Yup,” she replied.

Yuuki considered making a smart remark about how it was all thanks to the stone he’d given her, but since Yui didn’t look particularly happy, he ultimately refrained from doing so.

Nevertheless, they both started eating their rather late lunches. Yui’s meal was on the lighter side, consisting only of a single rice ball and a sandwich. Yuuki stayed quiet the whole time he was eating, and so did Yui. Eventually, she was the first to break the irksome silence.

“To be honest with you, this is my, er, my first time going on a date with someone,” she confessed.

“Hmm?”

“I’m relieved it wasn’t as complicated as my sister made it out to be. She kept telling me about the do’s and don’ts of dates, and the places I should avoid going to for lunch, and this and that... This almost makes me feel stupid for overthinking it so much yesterday.”

“Huh. Well, this isn’t a *real* date, so...”

“Yeah! Obviously I knew that!” she stressed loudly. She looked a bit dejected, for some reason. She looked away from Yuuki, her gaze instead resting on the half-eaten rice ball he’d been holding. “I didn’t think we’d be having corner-store rice balls in the park when you first asked me on this date.”

“Ah, my bad. Should we have gone somewhere else?”

“Oh, no! That’s not what I meant! I don't hate it, really. It’s surprisingly nice!” she clarified.

She looks kinda pissed for someone who’s supposedly having a good time, Yuuki thought. The discrepancy between what she said and what her facial expression showed puzzled Yuuki. Alas, he would chalk it up to Yui putting up a tough facade. Instead, he focused on the more pressing matters at hand: finishing off his food.

“I would’ve made you a lunch box if you told me this is where we were going. Missed opportunity!” Yui said.

“You’d do that? I do want to try your handmade cooking again.”

“R-Really?” she tried to play it cool as she nibbled on her sandwich. Something was definitely off; Yuuki could feel it. He took a closer look at her and, sure enough, she was smiling.

“You’re pretty easy to please.”

“S-So wait then! Were you lying just now?!”

“Haha. Nah, I wasn’t,” he chuckled, his lips morphing into a grin. It was an innocent smile, though it didn’t make Yui any less suspicious of him.

“You’re in an awfully happy mood today. It’s good to see you haven’t forgotten how to laugh,” she said sarcastically.

“What’s there to be unhappy about? The weather is great, not too hot, not too cold. And the breeze is refreshing...”

“And you have a beautiful girl sitting right next to you,” Yui added.

“Wonder if Mina’s eaten lunch yet,” Yuuki said, ignoring her.

“The good ol’ silent treatment, huh?”

Yuuki considered sending Mina a message asking how she was, but he figured that’d probably just annoy her more than anything, so he scrapped the idea altogether.

“What about you? You having fun, Yui?” he suddenly asked.

“Wh-Who, me? I mean... yeah, I guess.”

“Glad to hear it,” Yuuki responded with a smile. Yui averted her eyes and focused on eating her food. *Guess that was really embarrassing for her to say,* he wondered.

They finished their lunch before long. Afterwards, they sat on the bench for a while, enjoying the view of the pond. The weather was still warm, and Yuuki’s stomach was full, so perhaps it was only a matter before drowsiness took over. His eyelids were half opened and were becoming heavier by the second.

“You look pretty sleepy, Yuuki. Hehe, how about you rest your head... on my lap~?” Yui smirked.

“Oh, can I? Thanks,” he promptly accepted her offer.

“Timeout, timeout! I was joking!” she panicked, her face already a beet red. She desperately tried to push Yuuki’s rapidly lowering head away from her lap. “Stop this right now! I only said that so I could see you all embarrassed and everything! God, you were just waiting for an excuse, weren’t you?!”

“What the? That’s a pretty awful joke, even by your standards.”

“Wh-Why do you sound so angry?”

There was a good time and a bad time for a joke, and for Yuuki, who was currently at the verge of passing out, it was clearly the latter. He stared at Yui, struggling to keep his eyes open any longer.

“Hmm? I had no idea you wanted to sleep on my lap this badly,” she teased with an elated grin.

“I just want a pillow to sleep on.”

“I don’t like that tone. If you want it to happen, then you better repeat after me: ‘Please, oh wonderful and cute Yui, let me sleep on your lap,’” she dragged out her vowels as she spoke.

“Please, oh wonderful and cute Yui, let me sleep on your lap,” he parroted, elongated vowels and all.

“You really do scare me sometimes,” she said. While she did seem slightly creeped out, it appeared that Yuuki’s brazenness had worked in his favor this time around. She sat upright on the bench, grabbed the hem of her skirt, and straightened it out. “Y-You can come over now,” she said quietly while turning her face away.

Those were the magic words Yuuki needed to hear as he rotated himself 90 degrees to the side and slumped his face into her lap.

“Smells great in here.”

“Hey, keep those disgusting comments to yourself! You’re facing the wrong way too! That's not how this works!” Yui objected. She slapped her hands to his ears and forcefully turned his head away from her stomach and to the opposite direction. Her thighs were much softer than Yuuki’d expected, and they made for an extremely comfortable pillow.

“Haah, now you’ve done it. Just checking, but you *do* know that I’m only pretending to be your girlfriend, right?” she sighed.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Oh, so *nooooow* it doesn’t matter? How convenient,” she said, flashing an ominous smile at him. Yuuki was too sleepy to give up his brand new pillow, however, so he just relaxed and shut his eyes.

“Goodnight,” he mumbled.

“Wai—wha—?! A-Are you for real right now?” she complained. Still, she ensured her legs remained balanced at the perfect height, which made it all the more comfortable and snug for Yuuki. Within moments, he’d dozed off entirely.

◆◇

Wow, he actually fell asleep, Yui thought as she looked down at Yuuki’s peaceful form planted in her lap. She’d been joking from the start, but things had gotten out of hand, and Yuuki had successfully talked her into it.

I'd hate for someone we know to see us right now. She envied how seemingly unconcerned Yuuki was about how others viewed him.

Yui's paranoia got the best of her, and Yui took a quick peek around her. She was relieved to find that it was mostly deserted, save for a few elderly people sitting around on benches and some little kids running around. Getting seen by any of these people probably wouldn't cause her any problems.

Nobody our age is around, so there's nothing to worry about, right? Did he plan this from the very start? Yui seriously considered the possibility of Yuuki being a genius strategist for a moment, but quickly scrapped that idea when she again looked down and saw him napping peacefully.

"He's knocked the heck out. Maybe I should take a picture," she thought, her hand already moving toward her bag. Ultimately, though, she decided against it for fear of accidentally waking Yuuki up.

Though Yui didn't actually have a genuine reason to cater to Yuuki's comforts this much, she couldn't help it. The sight of his serene sleeping face and the sound of his quiet, measured breathing made it difficult for her to disturb him, even if she wanted to.

He's sorta cute, she thought. *If only he was this quiet and harmless when he was awake*. The more she looked at him, the more Yui felt a strange urge to pat his head and stroke his back. Before she knew it, her heart was racing like crazy.

Eventually, she couldn't take it any more and began to shakily extend her hand in order to fulfill her deepest desires. Fortunately—or otherwise—she came back to her senses and stopped herself just before her fingers made contact. Her conscience admonished her, harshly informing her that she'd have no excuse if her impulsive actions ended up rousing him.

"Oh yeah, 'you were so cute I couldn't stop myself.' Great excuse, Yui," she admonished herself. She wasn't entirely sure she'd have the guts to say that to his face if push came to shove. *Why do you get to be the one asleep when I'm just as drowsy?*

Yuuki's invitation had been completely unexpected for Yui. They had agreed to pretend that they were dating only in front of his sister, but the fact still remained that they were out on an honest-to-goodness romantic date right here and now. Yui had been so anxious about today that she'd gotten barely any sleep.

It was a mistake to go to Maki for advice. She'd totally panicked when he texted her yesterday, and her sister had taken the opportunity to blow the thing entirely out of proportion. Maki had sprinkled in half-truths and misleading advice that all led Yui to believe that a date was more akin to some sort of terrifying ritual than anything normal.

She got me again. Damn it! she bristled. *Turns out dates are pretty fun. It's like I have this fluffy and warm feeling inside all the time, and sometimes my heart just skips a beat—like now.*

Her rapidly pounding heart eventually settled down as time moved on, and an extreme feeling of sleepiness overcame her senses. It was as if Yuuki's sleeping face was beckoning her into the land of dreams.

The tranquil environment around her didn't help much either. Yui put up a valiant fight against the drowsiness while she looked at him. However, the sandman always wins, and she eventually nodded off alongside Yuuki.

Yui blinked. As she came back to her senses, she realized that she'd been leaning against something, and she sleepily raised her head to see what it was.

"Ah, you're up," spoke someone right next to her.

Yui slowly realized that the voice belonged to Yuuki, who was now sitting upright on the bench. Any leftover sleepiness that still lingered in her vanished in an instant following the realization that she had been sleeping on his shoulder the entire time.

"Wh-Why didn't you wake me up sooner?!" she asked red-faced and embarrassed.

"I felt bad about waking you up. Also, you looked cute while sleeping," he said, flashing a smile. Yui could feel her face turning more and more red, like all the blood in her body was rushing to her head.

"H-How long was I out for?"

"Some time, actually. I woke up because I felt something soft on my face. Turned out to be your chest. Smelled pleasant, felt pleasant... other than the fact that I was being smothered to dea—"

"Okay, you can stop now."

Having Yuuki thoroughly explain what happened with his opinions mixed in felt especially humiliating for Yui. It would appear that Yui had accidentally performed some very shameless acts while she'd been asleep. Judging from the fact that the sun was beginning to set, she guessed that this semi-lewd nap had lasted quite a long time.

This is awful... Maki wouldn't let me hear the end of it if she ever found out, Yui thought. “S-Sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep like that.”

“Nah, don’t worry. I did it first, after all. It’s kinda funny how we went on a date just to nap, though,” Yuuki couldn’t help but chuckle as he tried to reassure her.

His carefree tone made Yui breathe a sigh of relief, accompanied by a fuzzy sensation in her chest. She immediately recomposed herself, returning his smile with one of her own.

◆◇

Now that Yui was finally awake, Yuuki stood up from the bench and stretched. It was just about time for them to head home. The pair enjoyed another leisurely stroll down the boardwalk, this time with a colorful sunset for a backdrop. Before long, they were on the bus back to the train station where they’d originally met.

“What’s your plan now?” Yui asked, meeting eyes with Yuuki as the bus drove up to the station. Yuuki checked the time; it was right around five o’clock.

“I think Mina will probably be home soon. Hence I was thinking of grabbing us dinner before heading back myself.”

“Ah... I see,” she said.

Yui would most likely be taking the train home, so they were each heading their own separate ways once they got off the bus. Yuuki felt bad for dictating all of their plans based on what was convenient for him, now that he thought about it. Moreover, Yui looked like she wanted to say something.

“You fine with that?” Yuuki asked.

“Who, me? Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?” Yui answered. She was being surprisingly passive, and her refusal to make herself clear made it slightly challenging for Yuuki to deal with her.

She’s kinda like Mina in that respect. Speaking of, Yuuki began to recall how Mina had forcibly led Yui by the hand when she’d visited that one time. He began to feel more and more reluctant about parting ways for the day, so he made up his mind.

“Hey, Yui, how would you like to come over and have dinner? If you have the time, I mean. Mina rarely hits it off with strangers, so I think she’d

be really happy if you visited again."

"Wha—?" She was definitely surprised, but she appeared to consider it for a moment. "W-Well I, uh, if you insist!"

Yuuki then texted Mina to let her know about his plans to grab dinner. The fake couple got off the bus and made their way to the beef bowl shop near the station. Mina had enjoyed the food from there quite a lot last time, which made it an easy decision for him to pick up more.

When they arrived at the shop, he called Mina to find out what exactly she'd like to have. Interestingly, he couldn't reach her at all and kept getting redirected to her voicemail. The text he'd sent also remained unread. He figured there was a decently high chance that she was asleep, so he decided to just pick for her. He bought three portions of food and went off in the direction of his apartment with Yui.

"Let's get our story straight this time," Yui suggested. Together, they agreed on the key details as they got closer and closer to Yuuki's apartment. When Yuuki unlocked the door, he was surprised to find that the lights in the living room were off.

So she's asleep after all, huh? he thought to himself. One little detail debunked that assumption, however. He quickly realized that her shoes weren't by the door as they normally were.

"Mina isn't home yet?" Yui asked.

"Looks that way," Yuuki responded.

He warily entered the living room and set the bags of food down. He again tried calling Mina's number, and once again got sent to her voicemail. Just as he was about to check if she'd at least read his message, his phone vibrated.

"I'm still out with my friend, so I'll be coming home late," read Mina's text. Since no more messages appeared to be coming, he put his phone away and faced Yui.

"Sorry, I have to go," Yuuki said.

"Huh? Go where?"

"I know I'm asking too much, but could you hold down the fort for me? Call me if Mina comes home. Oh, and you can go ahead and eat if you're hungry," he told her without waiting for a reply and left the apartment as a bewildered Yui watched him go.

The sun had already settled beneath the horizon when he stepped outside the apartment. It was completely dark outside, and the streetlights

began to light up one by one. Yuuki's brisk footsteps soon turned into a half-run as he frantically searched for his sister.

First, he headed to the neighbouring park he and Mina used to frequent a lot when they were children. Although the park was a bit small and boring, with only a single swing, a slide, and a sandbox, Mina always used to pester him to take her there.

Their daily routine would consist of proving and re-proving to their mother that they could use the swing just fine on their own, and then they would show off their sand sculptures that they'd built when she came by to pick them up at night. The siblings would always hold their mother's hand when they walked back home.

Neither one of them wanted to return to the park after their mother had passed away. Despite that, Yuuki recalled seeing Mina sitting on the swings by herself a few times in the past. She'd looked like she was waiting for someone to come push her. When he got to the park, he thought maybe he saw her silhouette on the swings once more. Unfortunately, it was quite obvious that there wasn't a soul in the dim and gloomy park right now.

He sprinted past the park and arrived at a nearby supermarket. This specific store was pretty much the only place that Mina was able to shop at on her own, since she was so used to the place from her numerous past visits with their mother. Yuuki remembered how happy Mina got when their mother praised her for being able to go to the supermarket all on her own for the very first time.

Yuuki rushed into the store, and the complete lack of customers helped clue him in that it was truly past the peak time of the day. He checked every corner for Mina, but she continued to elude him. Now at a complete loss, he struggled to think of any other place that Mina would go to on her own.

It's possible she could have gone to that movie theater we went to the other day, or maybe that anime merch mall, he contemplated. *But that's still kind of far for her, and more importantly, I don't think she's ever stayed out this late on her own before.*

His mind made up, Yuuki sprinted down the road that he'd just strolled down with Yui. By the time he reached the train station, he was struggling for air. Nevertheless, he searched high and low for MIna amidst the masses still walking around the station. It was more crowded than usual, which wasn't unexpected considering that it was the weekend.

Yuuki wasn't even entirely sure that Mina was actually around here, but even if she was, finding her small figure among the throngs would be like finding a needle in a haystack. He did his best to put such thoughts out of his mind and focus the entirety of his efforts into scouring every inch of the place instead.

Next, he ran to the east entrance of the station through the passageway that connected each end of the station. He checked the entrance of the theater, did a lap around all of the nearby shops, and finally scouted every last floor of the anime mall. Throughout his search, he kept ringing her phone, but each time was to no avail.

Eventually, Yuuki had no choice but to return to the main part of the station. He had resolved to comb the entire vicinity around the station. In the process, he caught sight of the clock tower and was upset to realize that it was already almost eight o'clock.

It's getting way too late now, Yuuki said to himself. *I have to get back home. Yui is waiting all alone.*

When he arrived at his apartment, Yui came to the door as soon as he'd opened it. The grim expression on her face told him all he needed to know: it was obvious that Mina hadn't returned.

"You're drenched in sweat, Yuuki! You've gotta go wipe all that off," she said, the worry in her voice palpable. She clearly sensed the gravity of the situation.

"Forget about that. It's basically night time. We gotta get you home. Let's go; I'll walk you to the station."

"But what about Mina?"

"It's fine. I'll go to the police station after I see you off."

"Th-The police station? But... okay," Yui faltered.

The pair solemnly left the apartment and took the stairs to the bottom floor. As they approached the front door of the building, someone rushed into the building and bumped into Yuuki.

"I-I'm sorry," the person apologized in a small voice. They'd almost lost their balance and fell over. They hung their head suspiciously, hiding their features beneath the visor of the cap they were wearing, and tried to quickly walk past Yuuki.

Immediately, Yuuki called out Mina's name. The small figure who he now noticed wore a red backpack came to a complete stop. The silence persisted for a moment before a terrified pair of eyes turned to face Yuuki.

“O-Oh... it’s you, Yukkie,” Mina said, finally realizing that she had bumped into her own brother. She promptly took off her hat and let out an embarrassed giggle as she scratched her head. “Sorry, I was hanging with my friend and didn’t notice the time!”

“Why weren’t you answering my calls?” Yuuki pressed her.

“I-I was having so much fun that I didn’t notice you were calling me,” she explained after a brief pause, averting eye contact with Yuuki as she did.

Yui, on the other hand, looked to be staring at Mina, looking as though she had something to say. Yuuki gazed back, signaling to her that he had everything under control before gently patting Mina on the head’.

“That explains it. I guess it’s okay if you were having that much fun. Just make sure you don’t stay out this late next time, okay?” he admonished in a tender tone, apparently to everyone’s surprise. “You’re probably pretty hungry, huh? I bought beef bowls. Let’s go up and eat them together.”

Mina didn’t say anything, and her head remained drooped. Yuuki was about to hold her hand so that they could both finally return home, but Mina violently jerked her arm away just before their hands touched.

“Why?” Mina asked, strained, “Why aren’t you mad at me? You know I’m lying about having a friend... You know it! It’s all a lie!” she yelled, raising her head and glaring straight at Yuuki. He remained undaunted, however, and just gave her a soft smile.

“Why would I be angry at you?” he replied. Mina again hung her head and chewed on her lower lip before facing him once more.

“Why are you always like this?! Always! You didn’t even tear up when Mom died! Like she didn’t even matter to you! I was so sad that she was gone! I didn’t want to speak with anyone, eat anything, nothing... but you... you’re just strange, Yukkie! Why, *how* are you like this?!” her piercing high-pitched voice echoed through the hall.

Yuuki calmly and patiently waited for Mina to finish her tirade before he spoke up, “I’m so sorry, Mina.”

“I don’t want your apology! You’re making it harder, Yukkie! I can’t figure out how I’m supposed to feel!”

“... I’m your older brother, Mina. I can’t just sit down and cry with you,” he stated flatly.

Mina jerked to look at him, her eyes wide open. She blinked at him in disbelief, and her fingers grew weak, letting her beloved hat slip from her

fingers and fall to the ground. It was as if Yuuki's words had pierced through her very heart.

She couldn't keep her silent sobs in check any longer, and as her breathing gradually started to shudder, her body began to tremble. Tears were welling up in her eyes, just waiting for the floodgates to burst open.

"So you're blaming me? Is it all my fault?! Do you hate me cuz I'm a liar who's shy around people? Because I don't understand how you're feeling or what you've been going through? Because I can't do anything by myself?! I bet you think I'm just a nuisance! Some useless burden you've gotta lug around! One you wanna get rid of first chance you get!" she shouted.

With that, Mina finally burst out crying. Her tears left a trail down her cheeks before dripping onto the cold floor below, and the sounds of her weeping filled the air.

Maybe I panicked too much, Yuuki thought. *And I definitely got way too complacent about Mina. She told me she was fine when clearly that's not the case...*

—Look, Yuuki. See how this stone glows? I took the day off work to go to Okinawa to buy it from this person with mysterious abilities.

—What do you mean, 'how much did it cost?' Money isn't everything, Yuuki. And besides, I got it at a steep discount when I mentioned that your mother was in dire need of help.

—No! Mom didn't cook this, so I don't wanna eat it!

—I don't wanna go to school! I wanna stay with Mom!

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It all happened in an instant—their mother simply collapsed without warning and was promptly rushed to the hospital. There was no time for anyone to even process what had just happened. The unit was shattered, having lost its foundation, and would never be mended again. The foundation could never be replaced. Perhaps it was all pointless. No matter what Yuuki did, he was just one person, after all.

I'm alright. I'm okay, he assured himself, trying to keep the now-surfacing dark emotions in check. I*t's going to be just fine... just fine. I've made it this far, so there's nothing to be afraid of*. Those words of solace were no different from a mere misguided assumption as Yuuki had no real guarantee of what the future held.

Yuuki had managed not to snap at the time, but it may have all just gone so relatively well by mere coincidence, by sheer chance even. Whatever the case, he wasn't sure he could remain composed right here and now. Though he felt close to breaking down, he couldn't afford to cry. Not in front of Mina.

And so Yuuki exhaled slowly and steadily, expelling all of his painful feelings alongside the air before allowing himself to take another slow, deep breath.

"I'm sorry, Mina," he whispered gently, crouching so he could get close to Mina's ears.

"Why are you apologizing again, Yukkie?" Mina asked, earnestly trying to wipe away her tears with the sleeve of her jacket.

"Because I forced you to make friends. I won't bring it up again."

"You don't have to be sorry... I mean, you got yourself a girlfriend like we agreed."

"I never did. I was the one who lied first, Mina," he said, casting a wary glance at Yui before returning his gaze to Mina. "Yui... isn't my girlfriend."

"Wha—?!" Mina let out a surprised yelp.

She stared at Yui in disbelief. She hadn't doubted that they were a couple in the slightest. Yuuki felt bad about exposing the plan without checking with Yui first, but he figured that the lie wasn't worth it anymore. Yuuki followed Mina's suit and turned to Yui, giving her an apologetic shrug.

Yui, who had been silently watching them until now, gazed at each of them in succession before she spoke up, "Haha, what are you even saying, Yuuki? That's not funny at all. Are you trying to get a rise outta me or

something?" she chuckled with seemingly genuine amusement. Yui's reaction astounded Yuuki to no end.

Yui bent down to pick Mina's hat up off the floor. She gently dusted it off before putting it back on Mina's head, giggling as she did.

"You know, you were all that your brother could think of," Yui said. "Even when we were out on a date together! Then he ran around like he was possessed when he was searching for you earlier too. First time I've ever seen him sweat! So never talk like he doesn't want you around, Mina... He wouldn't have been so worried if that was true."

Mina listened attentively to Yui's words, sniffling all the while. After she had finished, she looked up at her brother, and her mouth curled into a frown.

"Why did you go that far for me? You could've just ignored me and enjoyed your time with Yui instead."

"I already told you, but I'll say it again: I'm happy when you're all good and healthy. And if you aren't, then I'd be sad no matter what I'm doing and no matter who I'm with," Yuuki said, wrapping his arms around Mina. He stroked her back as tenderly as he could, feeling her warmth and the faint trembling of her body.

"So where have you been hiding all this time?" Yuuki asked.

"The bathroom at the park... and the supermarket."

"Hah. I did miss those when I was looking, didn't I?"

It wasn't hard for Yuuki to imagine Mina locking herself in a bathroom somewhere. He felt miserable that he drove his sister into a corner like this, and the mere thought of Mina confining herself to a dark, musky space was heart-wrenching. It left him speechless.

The very next moment, a hand extended from the side and came to rest gently atop Mina's head. It was Yui's, and she promptly squatted down to Mina's eye level.

"You know, Mina, I used to not have any friends back in the day. I was really shy and boring, a throw-away, two-star character. But I still managed to evolve into a five star SSR character with a top notch sense of humor. I never even realized it was happening!" Yui said. She paused for a second to consider her words, then continued, "What I'm trying to say is that there's no need to panic, you know? Take it at your own pace!"

Somehow, Yuuki felt as though those words were meant not only for Mina, but for him as well. He felt himself relax after hearing them, as if a

load had been lifted from his shoulders.

She's completely right, he thought. There was no need for him to rush anything. He'd been able to overcome all the hardships he'd faced until now, and he decided he'd take the same approach to whatever life threw at him in the future, as well.

"I'll always be your older brother, Mina. Nothing will change that. When you make friends, when you grow up, and when you start relying on yourself, I'll still be your big brother. That's why we shouldn't celebrate Big Brother's Day."

"Yukkie..." Mina's voice trailed off, and she pushed her face into her brother's chest. Her shoulders shook as she grabbed his arms, and she began apologizing to him through sobs. Yui looked at Mina affectionately, then shot a glance at Yuuki.

"Let's keep the secret a bit longer, okay?" Yui said quietly, dragging out the last word. She sneakily pressed a finger to her lips and shot him a wink. Yuuki didn't reply and just continued comforting his sister. Yui smirked, then announced in an extremely cheerful tone, "C'mon, Yuuki! Turn that frown upside down, wouldja? Quit being so serious! I was never a fan of heavy atmospheres, y'know? Here, I've got just the thing for awkward silences..."

Yui quickly dug her notebook out of her bag. It took him a moment, but Yuuki recognized it as the same notebook she used to jot down her favorite jokes from improv shows. She flipped through it until she landed on something that caught her eye.

"Allow me to brighten up the mood with these funny zingers! Let's see here... Aha! That's a good one! *Ahem,* so our friend Kermit just entered highschool. He wasn't very popular, though, and struggled with making friends. Why do you think that is?" she asked. The siblings stared at each other in confusion, but that didn't faze Yui one bit, and she continued to read the punchlines by herself.

"Because his favourite music genre was *Hoppera*!"

"Because he was an am-*fib*-ian, a liar!"

"Because he caused a scene whenever the restaurants didn't have diet *croak!"*

"Because he kept bragging about his brand-new lilyPod!"

"Weren't those jokes *toadally* awesome?!" Yui asked excitedly. Unfortunately, it appeared her little puns weren't enough to amuse the

Narito siblings. Panic began to set in, and she couldn't help but start to spout off nonsense, "I *toad* you kids to get off my lawn!"

A couple of teenagers entered the building right when Yui finished that last joke, though they only briefly glanced at her as they walked right past her.

"Pffftttt, '*toad* you kids,' haha!" snickered one of the strangers.

"Y-You're ruining the *ribbeting* scenery, miss!" Yui replied with a blush, but her pun was only met with a forced smile.

Regardless, Yui's little standup routine eventually had the desired effect. Mina cracked a giggle as she rubbed her now puffy eyes. Her laughter was contagious, as Yuuki's expression softened up as well, and his own laughter joined hers.

Chapter Fourteen

Slayer of the Seatmate Killer

Once the trio had all gotten their fill of laughter, Yuuki and Yui walked Mina back up to the apartment before returning outdoors to head to the train station. Mina seemed to have returned to her usual high-spirited self by the time she waved goodbye to Yui for the night. She even excitedly invited her back soon, which made Yui happy.

Now, the faux couple walked down the dark, deserted streets, with only the occasional streetlight to keep them company.

"Sorry you had to stay out so late because of me," Yuuki apologized.

"No worries! I feel like my sister'd be on my case if I came home too early anyway," Yui chuckled.

Yuuki had kept his thoughts to himself while Mina had been around, but now that they were alone, he couldn't let Yui leave before he addressed the elephant in the room. So, at the first opportunity, Yuuki stopped beneath a bright streetlight and bowed his head to Yui.

"Thank you for what you said to Mina," he said.

"Oh, no need! I'm the one who came up with that silly 'fake-girlfriend' idea and put you into this situation in the first place."

"I mean..." Yuuki stumbled, at a complete loss on how to respond to her honesty. He felt a strange wringing sensation in his chest as indescribable feelings that were completely novel to him began to overcome him. He remained silent, his head still bowed as he tried to make sense of these strange new feelings.

"What's wrong, Yuuki? You got so quiet all of a sudden. Ah, I get it!" Yuuki couldn't see it, but he could just *hear* the smirk that had appeared on Yui's face, "Did you finally fall for me? Hmmm?"

Those words were like a thunderbolt that blasted through Yuuki's system. His head shot up, and his body quivered with fear. He'd finally remembered something awfully important, something that had managed to slip his mind altogether up until now.

That's right, she... she's the—The Seatmate Killer; the experienced hunter who'd made light work of countless unsuspecting victims whose only crime was sitting next to her. His entire relationship with Yui began to flash before Yuuki's eyes, and he began to construct a quick theory of his

own. To his horror, he began to consider the likelihood that everything that had happened recently was all part of an intricate and grand scheme that she had masterminded.

Damn, there's a chance that she even used unplanned events to her advantage, too, he pondered. Yuuki had now gotten a taste of the true power of The Seatmate Killer; yet he had only caught a glimpse of a fraction of the frightfully deep darkness that dwelled within. *Just what the hell made her this way?*

Nevertheless, Yuuki had already resolved to watch over her no matter what, so he couldn't simply throw in the towel when he felt like it.

We'll take it one step at a time. Both of us. There's no need to rush anything, he thought as he made eye contact with her once again. "Yui," he said, his gaze as fond as he could manage. Yui's expression, which had been a genuine, broad grin until that point, suddenly tensed up. "Yui, I... I..."

"Y-Yes?" she asked, so nervous that she moved nary an inch. She found the strength to awkwardly look away, perhaps because she was shaken that Yuuki had finally seen through her plans, or so he thought. Still, Yui was full of many more surprises, and she soon stared right back at him, scrutinizing his every action. Yuuki realized that she was still up to the challenge.

A devil dwelled deep within her heart, so deep-rooted that it often surfaced and compelled Yui to cause all sorts of mischief, eventually earning her that appalling nickname. She was a formidable opponent, and Yuuki knew that any misstep would risk destroying her very selfhood. That was why he believed the only path forward was to gently indulge her rather than collide with her head-on.

"I will never give up on you, Yui. You don't have to worry," he continued.

"Hwhat. What do you mean?"

"Huh?"

The silence that stretched between them would get more uncomfortable by the second as the two of them exchanged puzzled looks. Yuuki could at least understand that Yui wanted him to elaborate on account of her stunned expression and inquiring tone. Still, words escaped him, and instead he opted to wrap his arms around Yui, embracing her and stroking her back just as he had with Mina in the apartment lobby.

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“GAAH!!!” she yelped. Her agonizing scream that echoed throughout the otherwise calm streets was more befitting of a dying demon than a highschool girl.

She’s finally purified, Yuuki thought to himself, deeply moved now that Yui was free of her curse.

Suddenly, a pair of hands blocked his line of sight. They grabbed onto his skull with the force of a thousand sailors, the nails nearly ripping into his flesh. Soon enough, Yui was able to tear herself away from Yuuki’s grasp.

She took a few swift steps backwards and covered herself with both arms. She shouted at him, red-faced, “Wh-What has gotten into you?! Stranger danger! Stranger danger!”

“You didn’t like that?” he asked cluelessly.

“I-It’s not about liking it or not! There’s an order you do things in! And anyways, what were you even thinking?! D-Didn’t you pull this exact same thing on Mina just a dang second ago? It’s not a move you can just keep spamming to win!”

“Well, I suppose we could take it easy.”

“Take *what* easy?! Y’know, like, I *did* tell Mina to go at her own pace, but when it comes to you, we should probably be panicking! Something’s definitely wrong with you if you keep randomly hugging people out of the blue like that!” she cried out.

“Keep it down. It’s pretty late,” he shushed her by pressing a finger to her lips. It was an effective technique, but Yui continued to glare at him furiously. *Hmm, she’s a tough nut to crack.*

Whatever the case, Yuuki decided to not pursue the matter any further tonight. He turned back and again began walking in the direction of the station. Yui followed him without uttering a single word.

The train station soon came into view. Yui, who appeared to have finally calmed down, caught up with Yuuki and walked right beside him.

She let out an exaggerated sigh before speaking, “Looks like I’ll have to be your fake girlfriend for the time being. I was kinda forced to say that for Mina... S-So if it becomes way too much of a pain, we could just become a real coup—”

“You went way too far back there,” Yuuki suddenly admonished her. “You can’t just boast about being funny, then fail immediately. Especially not in front of strangers.”

“That’s uncalled for! I know, maybe my Yui Finger technique will knock some sense into you! Ora ora!” she screamed while raising her arms menacingly. Yuuki only smiled, finding it amusing how quickly Yui could change moods. Yui stood still for a moment before lowering her arms. “Gosh, what am I gonna do with you,” she grumbled to herself.

They reached the train station soon after. It was bustling with people despite the late hour, and several groups of young guys and girls gathered near the entrance. Yuuki and Yui slowly made their way to the ticket gate.

“You sure you’ll be fine on your own? Want me to tag along?” Yuuki asked, turning to face Yui.

“No thank you! I can handle myself just fine!” Yui protested. She was about to say goodbye, but something about Yuuki’s expression made her speak up again in a serious tone. “I was kinda surprised, you know? You usually look pretty out of it and super relaxed... but watching you with that stern look on your face made me realize that you *really are* an honest and caring older brother. And I thought that was nice.”

“Damn, I should be more careful in the future, I guess. My bad,” he said abruptly.

“What are you apologizing for?” she hesitated.

“I didn’t mean to get such a weird, sincere reaction out of you. If you praise me any more, I’ll start getting the creeps.”

“... Huh?”

◆◇

It was early morning, the start of a new week. Mina seemed to be completely knocked out, so Yuuki entered her room to wake her up and make sure she was ready for school on time.

“Take it easy~ I’m gonna take it easy~” she mumbled in her sleep.

“You’re taking it way too easy. Rise and shine,” Yuuki said. Mina was lazily squirming around inside the futon, so he forcibly dragged her out of it. As he’d suspected, she was playing a—now confiscated—portable game console under the blanket.

“What the?! Why’d you do that for, Yuukie?! You cruel and heartless monster! That does it! I’m leaving the house! I won’t return until it’s super duper late!”

“Have fun.”

“Just kidding! Let’s get all snuggly and warm with each other! Just like yesterday! Hold me gently, and stop me from going!”

It would appear that Mina had learned another special pestering move. Yuuki dutifully ignored her and quickly got her prepared for school, all the while scrambling to make it to his own school before homeroom started.

He entered the classroom and made his way through the excited students to his seat. He quietly placed his bag on the desk and sat down in his chair. The sound of his chair scraping across the floor notified his seatmate of his arrival, and she glanced up away from her phone to give him a friendly smile.

“Mornin’!”

“Good morning,” Yuuki replied. He didn’t bother continuing the conversation any further, opting instead to retrieve a book from his bag. For a brief, beautiful moment, everything was peaceful. Then Yui’s cheerful voice rudely interrupted his reading session.

“Hey, what’cha reading there?” she asked.

“A book,” he replied without as much as looking up at her. Another brief pause came along. This time, the silence didn’t last nearly as long, as Yuuki could feel the pressure of someone glaring at him intensely from the side, followed by Yui scraping her own chair closer to his desk.

“Who reset my game and overwrote my save?” she asked.

“Reset what now?” he said, confused. Now he did look at Yui, only to find her sulking. She was angry with him; that much was obvious. However, Ace Advocate Yuuki couldn’t figure out why.

“A lot happened with us last week, you know? And I personally feel like... we’ve gotten closer to each other. So now, I’m wondering why it feels like we’ve reset, like, back to square one, or maybe even worse than that,” she explained.

“Ah, I see.”

“*AAAHH, I seeeee,”* she parroted his words sarcastically. Yuuki didn’t understand what had gotten into her first thing in the morning, but he couldn’t help but crack a smile on seeing that disgruntled look on her face.

“It’s pretty nice coming to school and having someone to talk to,” he said.

“Yuuki Narito everyone. Public speaker number one,” she mocked him.

“I’m glad the seats were changed.”

“Huh?” she gulped, her grim expression turning to surprised shock in an instant. She was slack-jawed, staring at Yuuki without moving a muscle.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ah, well, nobody’s ever said that to me before so, uh, I’m really—no! *Super* happy!” she exclaimed joyfully. It would appear that Yuuki’s complement hit a sweet spot, as she began to giggle. She looked genuinely overjoyed strangely enough. Yuuki decided that it was time to deviously turn the tables on her.

“Yup, sitting by the window is the best,” he told her.

“*That’s* why you’re glad?!” she shouted. Before he knew it, Yuuki had fallen victim to another nagging barrage from Yui. He didn’t mind at all, however, and he turned his gaze to the clear sky outside the window. The peaceful, azure hue of the sky made him feel generally content with everything. So much so that Yui’s ramblings didn’t bother him at all, no matter how close to his ear she got.

“Hey! I’m talking to you! Don’t ignore meeee!!!”

To be continued in the second volume.

Extra Side Story

The Sleeping Beauty

The break between classes began, and the idle chatter of students filled the classroom. There was nothing out of the ordinary happening for Mina, who was quietly sitting alone at her seat as she usually did. Her desk was the last one in the middle row. Unfortunately, the sound of laughter coming from the blathering guys standing near her seat soon disturbed her peace and quiet.

Ugh, I hate this, Mina thought to herself. She liked sitting at the back, but that came with the major drawback of people congregating in the area between her desk and the blackboard on the wall behind it. Mina had an ace up her sleeve for just this situation, though: she prostrated herself on top of her desk and pretended to be asleep.

"Hey guys, keep it down. Sleeping Beauty over here is snoozin'," whispered one of the guys. Amazingly, the group piped down out of consideration for their napping classmate.

Sleeping Beauty was the nickname forced upon Mina due to her habit of pretending to doze off during the breaks between classes; this was a revelation that she'd only recently made.

Three years had passed since her mother had died and Mina had fallen into an inescapable pit of depression. At that time, she had begun to skip classes as often as she could and instead shut herself away from the world in her room. As a natural consequence, she ended up growing even more distant from the few friends she'd managed to make.

Her middle school life hadn't gotten off to a great start either. Her absences continued up through the first year of middle school, and so all the groups and cliques had already been established by the time she returned. The first year came and went, but the second year did not bring any change with it. Mina's personality, the way she was treated by her classmates, and even her homeroom teacher all remained the same this year.

What kind of name is Sleeping Beauty anyways? Am I... getting bullied? That's some 4D bullying right there.

In Mina's mind, she was simply a loner who used this tactic to pass the time, the furthest thing from some fairy-tale princess. Still, that nickname didn't bring any actual harm her way. In fact, it felt like her classmates were

strangely considerate toward her, as evidenced by their quieter tones whenever she was around. Most of the class seemed to see her as a frail girl, in part because of how often she missed class and how frequently she came down with fever.

It's all just white noise. I can ignore it, she muttered to herself.

She sluggishly raised her head and rubbed her eyes theatrically. Then she retrieved her noise-cancelling headphones that she'd bought with Yuuki. She then connected the headphones to her phone, turned airplane mode on, and blasted anime music on maximum volume, as was her go-to tactic whenever she wanted to drown out noise.

Mina understood that she couldn't go on like this forever, obviously. Despite that, making friends was an extremely daunting task for her, especially considering the peculiar pressure emanating from her classmates, a pressure that was quite different than any she felt elsewhere.

"Because I forced you to make friends. I won't bring it up again."

Yuuki's words swirled around in her mind. She remembered the way her brother had smiled, and how something just felt *off* underneath. It brought an uncomfortable, stinging pain to her chest, so much so that her headphones didn't help at all. They remained in her hands rather than on her head, and she instead opted to focus on the conversation a couple of her classmates were having. Could there possibly be an opportunity for her to join in?

"—I can't pull the Dark Knight at all, man. Failing pretty epically right now."

"You have to pray to the Gacha gods and go all in on the banner."

Mina's ears twitched at the mention of that particular character. Those classmates were talking about the same mobile game she played.

Who, me? Yeah, I got super lucky. Pulled the Dark Knight in my first 10 roll! she chuckled to herself while continuing to eavesdrop on their conversation. *Maybe if I showed them I have that character, they'll want to be my friends!*

She made up her mind, pulled her phone out, and launched the game as naturally as she could. She took a few not-too-inconspicuous glances at them to catch their attention, but the plan was a bust before it ever even got off the ground; the guys simply left the classroom before her game had even finished loading up.

Mina was of course disappointed, but decided she may as well collect the log-in bonus since she'd already opened the game. The hairs on the back of her neck suddenly stood up, alerting her to an intense glare coming from the seat right next to her.

Gah! A murderous stare! IMy worst enemy!

Bringing phones to school was prohibited, and Mina knew she could get into serious trouble if somebody tattled on her. She sensed impending danger, so she put away her phone and laid face-down on her desk once more.

According to Mina's Sleeping Sonar—her secret technique that allowed her to parse the sounds around her when she entered this state of faux sleep and thus get a grasp of her classmates' interpersonal relationships—the girl right next to her was the quiet type that didn't like to stand out.

My most generous estimate is that she has around five points in her charisma stat. Hah! Weakling, she thought, rather confidently for someone who hadn't come close to unlocking that skill tree. Nevertheless, that seatmate of hers was still a potential target. In fact, just yesterday Mina was messaging Yui about the easiest way to make friends.

"Just hit her with a one-liner, Mina!" Yui's message read.

"Like what?" Mina asked.

"Take a deep breath, then strike a pose while putting your arms behind your head and say: 'you know you want this, baby!'" Yui replied with a smug emoji attached. Needless to say, Mina wasn't exactly sold on the idea.

"I can't pull something like that off. I'm not a comedy geni*yu*s like Yui," she lamented under her breath. Besides, she wouldn't have trouble conversing with people if she was that daring in the first place. Mina hated large crowds and always preferred being left on her own. The only time she'd act natural and excited in front of people was when she felt safe around the other person. As a result, she had trouble even smiling when talking to others.

"What I'm trying to say is that there's no need to panic, you know? Take it at your own pace!" Yui's words suddenly resurfaced in Mina's mind. *I appreciate your help, Yui, but I want my conversation skills to be more... low-key.* Ironically, Mina didn't socialize with anyone at all, so her worries about conversation techniques were entirely irrelevant. *Nobody is gonna come up and talk to me if I keep sitting around like this.*

Mina began to suspect that perhaps pretending to sleep in class wasn't exactly the best move, as it might've inadvertently made her less approachable. So she finally decided to make an effort to appear more friendly. Unfortunately, she again noticed someone staring at her just when she raised her head from the desk. She slowly looked to the side, and her eyes met with the girl sitting next to her. Mina's face gradually began to burn up and redden the more she looked at her seatmate until, eventually, she couldn't bear it anymore and turned away.

That almost gave me a heart attack! Mina thought. She had felt like someone was observing her in the classroom for a while now and even told Yuuki about it, though he simply chalked it up as a product of Mina's vivid imagination. Clearly this wasn't the case. Not this time around. She was certain that someone was watching her while she faked sleeping.

Is this what society would feel like if people were under surveillance at all times? Possibly by some large organization hiding in the shadows? How dystopian, Mina pondered, looking down at her desk and trembling with fear.

"Umm, excuse me!" a voice abruptly rang out, startling Mina.

S-Somebody's watching me for real this time, Mina told herself, nervously turning her head to the source of the voice.

"A-Are you awake... Princess?" her seatmate asked with a stiff smile. Mina immediately took note of what the girl called her and concluded that it definitely meant that she was an agent sent by the organization. "I-I'm sorry to bother you, but—"

"I'm fine with not drinking diet *croak!"* Mina shouted.

"E-Excuse me?" the girl said, stunned.

"I told you to get off my lawn!" Mina continued. *Oh wait, it's toad, not told... and I didn't even set the joke up,* she remembered much too late. The damage had already been done.

"Wh-What lawn?" the girl inquired.

Crap, this is bad! I'm hit, I'm hit! Alpha One engaging evasive maneuvers! Mina quickly stood up from her chair in order to make a hasty retreat. Unluckily, she stumbled over her own legs and fell onto her hands in a shamefully over-the-top fashion.

"Are you, uh, fine?" the girl approached her.

"Sublime," Mina answered with an out-of-place rhyme.

Now was not the time to sweat the small stuff. Mina put as much power as she could into her arms and swiftly pushed herself up off the floor. She desperately tried to appear as though nothing had happened, then hurriedly escaped the classroom and headed straight to the restrooms.

I messed up. I seriously messed up, she panicked. Mina was at her wit's end as she locked herself inside a free stall. Once the adrenaline wore off a bit, she realized that she'd caught herself awkwardly when she slipped and fell, so both of her hands were now tingling in pain.

Man, I don't think I can ever become like Yui, she thought. *Whatever I try to do, I always just end up locking myself in a bathroom stall somewhere...*

Her incompetence when it came to other people stirred up feelings of sadness within her, and she started to realize just how good Yui truly was at it. *I mean, she carries a whole notebook brimming with jokes! She's unstoppable!* she thought as she recalled Yui's jokes. *I don't think I could ever do that myself.*

"Y-You're ruining the ribbeting scenery, miss!" Mina recalled what Yui had said, and how the couple who were passing by laughed at her. Yui's blushed face was particularly amusing, and it made Mina chuckle a bit, alleviating some of the gloomy feelings that were weighing on her.

It's funny to me, but it must've been pretty embarrassing for poor Yui. They laughed so hard at her back then... Oh, I know! I'll text Yukkie and tell him how hard I tried to talk with someone today!

Mina retrieved her phone from her pocket and opened the messaging app, then started to type up a message, *Let's see... How about something like: "Yukkie, you are hereby sentenced to patting my head for the day."*

She ultimately scrapped the idea and began drafting a new message. She considered opening by calling him "Bro," but for some odd reason, that felt rather embarrassing to her.

Why am I getting so worked up over it? I'll just send him one like I usually do. Hmm, how about: "Forsooth, I am the God of all lavatories. I demand my reverence posthaste!"

Again, however, her nimble fingers froze while her thumb hovered over the send button. Mina figured that she would be making her brother worry if she sent him such a wacky message. The mere thought of troubling her brother made her uneasy, which was quite a novel feeling for her.

What do I do here? she pondered to herself, her brother's worried face flashing in her mind as she tried to think up a new message to send.

Yuuki always looked so absentminded, he rarely showed any emotion, he seldom talked, and there were times where Mina genuinely couldn't tell what he was thinking. He was sloppy, clumsy, not particularly good at school, and wasn't athletically gifted or anything. In other words, he was worlds apart from the ideal older brother that everyone would envy.

Still, he was always there for Mina when she needed him the most, watching over her no matter what. Mina hung her head, completely lost. However, she suddenly recalled the way he would gently pat her head

"I'll always be your older brother, Mina."

Reminded of Yuuki's words, Mina let out a quiet laugh. Her fingers moved once again, deleting that outlandish message altogether. Newfound determination flowed through her body as she put her phone away.

Regardless of what anybody else would say, Mina knew that she did well for herself today. "I'll just take things at my own pace!"

Afterword

Hello everyone, it's nice to meet you. My name is Aresanzui, and I'm the author of this book. If you already know me from the web novel series, then I would like to thank you for your consistent support.

This volume is the revised and edited version of the web novel. I've changed a handful of miscellaneous things and even completely rewrote some bits. The story itself is now more consistent, and I would go so far as to say that it's a step up from the web version of the story. And most importantly, it now has wonderful illustrations to enhance some scenes. So even if you didn't enjoy the story itself, you're still getting your money's worth in that regard.

I'm usually active—well, if you can call it being active—on the site Shousetsuka ni Narou (Let's Become a Novelist), where I can write whatever I want. I've always been a damn contrarian, and I tend to stubbornly drag my stories in whatever direction I see fit if I'm left to my own devices. However, I paid a lot of attention to readers' suggestions as I wrote this book, and I feel like I was able to actually see the bigger picture and calmly assess what I wanted to do.

I figured I'd make the story about two people chatting on and on, but the story kept naturally developing the more I wrote it until it became what it is today. It was meant to be a stress-free and sweet love story on the surface, but, well, it took some unexpected turns along the way. Par for the course for me. Fortunately, I received an offer to novelize the series eventually, and it was accepted for publication before I even knew what was going on.

To tell you the truth, all the novels I've ever read were historical ones, and I never so much as touched an actual light novel during my middle/high school years. I did have a vague aspiration to become a novelist one day, but I'd always thought it was an impossible dream for me, so I hadn't particularly done much to pursue it.

One time, I actually held a light novel in my own two hands and naively believed that I could write one myself. So I did. I submitted a dumpster fire even by rookie standards, and of course, I had the door slammed shut right in my face.

I genuinely thought that I wasn't cut out for it when that happened and promptly gave up on the whole thing. Despite everything, I found the act of

writing itself to be extremely fun for me, and so I kept at it. I stumbled around for a while until I found my way to a website that wasn't all that well-known at the time (probably): Shousetsuka ni Narou.

This is by no means a dig at the site or anything like that, but my first thoughts as I was registering for it were: "Let's Become a Novelist? Are you sure that's a good name?"

So I began posting my writing there without having any expectations that anything I wrote had the slightest chance of being novelized. I treated it kind of like a game where I looked at the analytics and tried to figure out how I could get readers to click on what I write, how to make them leave good ratings and bookmark my work so that I could accumulate more points on the site. Before long, I suppose I did actually become a novelist, so the site did live up to its name.

There are truly multiple ways to become a novelist. Though having said that, I would still be hesitant to actively call myself one.

I don't really have much to add about the contents of this book, but I would say I wouldn't want the readers to empathize with the protagonist of the story as much as to take a step back and fondly watch over him, no matter how goofy he is sometimes. Then again, everyone has their own opinions, and I'd be happy if my work left an impression on you, whether it was because of a character, or due to a joke.

Finally, I would like to express my profound gratitude for all the readers who have read my web novel and bookmarked, rated, and commented on my work, as well as for the publishing company; starting with my editor-in-chief, my supervisor, my editor, and for Sabamizore, who worked on the illustrations for the book. And last but not least, for everyone who bought this book.

Thank you all so much.

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